Joan Coghill

MARKED MEN

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BY

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CHAPTER I

"GENTLEMEN," the lips of J. G. Smith, attorney at law, curved into an urbane smile under a gray line of trimly clipped moustache, "the hour has struck. The Hun is at the gate. Will you be good enough to vacate this room and let us have those chairs you are sitting in?"

Back of the speaker's spare and immaculately clad figure bulked the heavier and rougher bodies of a squad of work-grimed men in overalls; men who seemed out of place here, yet whose presence was both appropriate and necessary.

Jerry Cliff, who had been resting his white head against the deeply cushioned back of his favourite reading chair, shifted his aging bones forward and grasped his walking stick in his right hand. He did not rise with obedient alacrity, but sighed as he gave voice to a grumbling spirit.

"Dispossessed! Turned into the street after forty years! I call it hard. I call it damned hard."

Acquiescent growls from other seated figures gave support to the sentiment.

One man only grinned broadly, and he was the irreverent infant of the group, a mere lad of forty or forty-five.

"It is both hard and very sad," he commented. "My own sorrow seems a little thing in comparison as I

sit here contemplating the tragedy of it. Behold a handful of retired bank presidents and actively predatory capitalists driven out upon the pitiless sidewalk."

"That's the precise point," the lawyer reminded him, "you are still sitting and watching it. Now I put it to you as man to man—if you would stand up it would be easier to move out your chair."

"I was under the distinct impression," complained Mr. Cliff, erstwhile president of the West National Bank, "that we were to be allowed to occupy these premises until three o'clock."

"Correct—and you have already occupied them until three-ten," announced Mr. Smith soothingly. "The notice has been posted on the bulletin board for two weeks. The doors of this building were to close at three. After all, it's not as if we had no new home. If we are being kicked out, at least, gentlemen, we are being kicked upstairs."

The men in overalls stood stolidly shuffling from foot to foot as they waited. Somehow they conveyed the impression of vandals restive to be about their work of sacking a captured temple. Others of their kind were already carrying out bookcases, tables, and rolled rugs. The great room, wainscotted and raftered in dark wood, and until yesterday a place of age-mellowed, Victorian luxury, had already been stripped by their ruthless hands to an empty and forlorn desolation, yet this handful of regulars clung on like the last tenacious leaves on a starkly stripped oak.

Slowly, however, they came to their feet now, and since they moved with the deliberation of age and dignity, there was a contrasting effect of rapacious

greed in the briskness with which the predatory truckmen pounced on the great leather chairs and whisked them away.

"Yes, we have a new home and a damn fine one," grumbled Mr. Cliff, "but we can't go there until Tuesday and this is only Saturday. At my age three days are a bite out of a man's life."

The group moved to the wide door of the lounging room and out into the stripped barrenness of the hall.

For several days the preliminary work of moving the Sportsman's Club out of the building which had been its home for two score years and into the newer and more sumptuously modern structure which it was henceforth to occupy, had been methodically progressing. But that had been a gradual business and devoid of shocking realizations. Now the place seemed to be going to pieces under one's eyes like the demolition of an elaborate stage interior when the curtain has dropped and the stage hands strike the set.

Into the hearts of the men who came out to the hallway and peered into the library across the way crept an unreasonable chill of nostalgic desolation. The library, too, presented an aspect of denuded starkness, but in one corner remained a large couch so age-worn and dilapidated that it seemed past rehabilitation, and about it stood several straight-backed chairs.

"Ha, a reprieve," shouted the youngest member of the group. "Gentlemen, we will make our last stand here. I see places to sit down. Perhaps we may hang

on ten minutes longer. With luck, it may even be fifteen."

J. G. Smith shrugged his shoulders and smiled with mock resignation, though his eyes twinkled.

"Then, as Chairman of the House Committee, I must stay, too. I must see the cat put out and the doors locked," he told them; then he went on reflectively:

"I wonder what the psychology of our feeling is? Here for ten years and more we've all been complaining about this ratty old building which the club has long outgrown. Now at last we have a new place that fulfils our aspirations, yet we cling to these ruins with a sense of bereaved attachment as sentimental as that of schoolgirls."

He paused and looked about the disconsolate place where, except for the men he addressed, he saw no familiar faces. There was a hurrying to and fro, indeed, but it was of workmen busy with their tasks of dismantling. There was also a sprinkling of strangers strayed in from the streets, through an entrance no longer guarded by a door man, strangers actuated by an idle curiosity to inspect a celebrated club, if only in its moments of dissolution.

"I am sure most of us have other clubs," continued Smith, "and yet here we are, a little remnant of the old guard, musing forlornly on the past. We are like the boy on the burning deck—only we're not boys."

"Hell!" retorted the peppery Mr. Cliff, whose profanity was agreeably casual, "why shouldn't we dwell on the past? About this house cluster the traditions of forty years. You say we can go to other clubs, and

I say there isn't any other club like this one. Its name stamps it. 'The Sportsman's.' I for one never favoured the idea of moving. We are leaving our background behind us."

The old banker, small and natty as a plump cock robin, waved his stick about the panelled walls.

"Why, I've dined with President Cleveland in this house and shaken hands with John L. Sullivan. The Sportsman's is made up of men—not stuffed shirts—and now for three days it shuts us out on the street."

The speaker broke off and groaned, for in the doorway appeared the stocky figure of the club manager, followed by a crew of husky vandals.

"If you gentlemen will just let us pull that rug out and roll it up," he began briskly, and as the harried die-hards gave back, inch by inch, the Chairman of the House Committee inquired:

"Are you all clear upstairs, Atwood?"

"All clear everywhere except card room Number Two on the second floor," answered the manager cheerfully. "Mr. Archibald's up there."

"So we get dumped out of our chairs and brushed off of the rugs," snapped the choleric Mr. Cliff, "while this Mr. Archibald is accommodated with a private room as long as he desires it."

Managers of clubs have need of diplomatic natures. Now Atwood turned suavely to the ex-banker.

"You see, Mr. Cliff," he offered explanation, "Mr. Archibald told me earlier in the day he had an appointment with some gentlemen before three o'clock. They got here late and the guest room is full of junk—so I guess he just took them upstairs."

Cliff nodded and growled.

"I have often wondered," he inquired of no one in particular, "how Archibald ever got into this club, anyhow."

"You have just told us that yourself," the attorney reminded him. "We are very catholic and Archibald is not a stuffed shirt. Moreover, there comes the subject of our comments now. He seems to be leaving the premises and I beseech you gentlemen to follow his excellent example."

The great double door giving out from the library upon the tiled hall commanded an uninterrupted view of the main stairway which rose straight from its massive newel post to the first landing, and on that landing appeared the tall and robust figure of Mr. Archibald.

For a moment or two, as if he, too, were stirred to sentimental regret at the thought of leaving these hallowed precincts, he stood there looking soberly down with one hand gripping the mahogany rail. Possibly it was because the men below found it difficult to reconcile any idea of sentimentality with their appraisal of Mr. Archibald's nature that they turned their eyes on him and remained for the instant silent.

It was the irrepressible youngest member who broke the silence by calling out genially:

"Hello, Archibald, so you're taking your last long look, are you?"

The broad-shouldered fellow on the landing did not at once answer, and that was strange. If captious men like Cliff found fault with him it was rather for a bois-

terous geniality and a lack of reticence than for any tendency to aloofness.

"Give him an inch," Cliff had once grumbled, "and he takes all hell."

He was a handsome man as he stood there straight and silent, and he might have been called one of the best-dressed men in the club were it not that in his clothes, as in his manner, he lacked an appreciation of true conservatism. But strength and physical vitality and a boldness that was almost a hardness in his eye: these things he had and they made him a striking fellow, whether one admired him or not.

Then, after a long pause, he spoke briefly and unsmilingly, and his voice was grim.

"Maybe my last look," he said shortly, "and maybe—not such a long one."

"Sentimental like the rest of us, eh?" questioned the youngest member. "I thought you were too hard-boiled for that."

Then Archibald started down and he seemed to come a bit unsteadily, grasping the rail as an old man does who treats a stairway as a minor peril.

"He's drunk," growled Cliff, but at once he realized the injustice of that criticism as he remembered that Archibald had the fanatic's zeal for physical fitness and eschewed liquor with the rigidity of a good Mohammedan. With that thought he heard Smith exclaim, "The man's ill," and saw Smith start for the hall. But before the lawyer had reached the door the figure on the stairway lurched forward. Archibald's grip on the rail relaxed and he came rolling down in

a huddled mass to lie awkwardly twisted and misshapen on the tiled floor below.

Smith, Atwood, and the younger member reached him about the same moment and lifted him from the floor. They carried him in and laid him on the couch, which had, this time, been vacated without remonstrance, and when they had stretched him out as comfortably as possible the man opened his eyes and his lips stirred stiffly.

"Thank you," he said.

"Atwood," demanded Smith crisply, "is there a doctor in the building? Well, get one from somewhere and get him quick."

The stricken man had instinctively clutched with his right hand at his breast, and now the hand fell away and its palm showed moistly red.

The youngest member of the group was opening the vest. Suddenly he stood up with amazed eyes.

"This isn't any natural attack," he announced bluntly. "There's a bullet hole here."

Smith was already bending over the figure on the couch, and his words sounded with a clear insistence through the clashing and disjointed fragments of exclamatory chorus.

"Time may be precious, Archibald. You may be in the shadow of death. Who did this? How did it happen?"

The big man's grimly set face remained stiff and unresponsive. His eyes were open and staring ahead, and almost imperceptibly he moved his head.

"Get my own doctor—Haynes," he commanded,

ignoring the exhortation to name his assailant, "and my lawyer—Lew Codington."

"Yes, of course, but meanwhile——"

The usually ruddy face which, in its ashen pallor, seemed transformed and strange, hardened, and into the narrowing eyes came a glint of obstinacy like pale light on polished granite. The straight lips shaped, rather than sounded, two words, and only two.

"Not—talking."

Atwood reappeared in the door and Smith drew him quickly aside.

"He wants his own doctor and lawyer. Get them," he directed, handing over a scribbled memorandum of names, "and call the police. He's been shot."

Atwood's jaw dropped in shocked bewilderment; then responding to the need for action, he wheeled without a word and started away. The lawyer caught up with him.

"On second thought I'll do the 'phoning," he said. "I want you to shut and lock the doors. Get all the workmen into the back of the house and keep them there. Let no one leave this building or enter it—except the doctor and the officers."

He turned back to the library then, and as he spoke to his fellow clubmen his voice was brittle with command.

"You gentlemen will remain here with Archibald. Do what you can for him until the doctor comes."

Going up the stairway with the speed of a boy, he hastened to the door of the small room marked with the numeral two and found it empty. He did not cross the threshold of the open door, since that was a mat-

ter for the police, but he stood guarding it until the clanging of gongs below announced the arrival of authorized investigators and Atwood came to relieve him as sentinel.

"Dr. Haines hasn't come yet, but there's an ambulance surgeon with Archibald," reported the manager. "The police are here—a sergeant and some cops. You'd better go down."

Already the ant-hill activity of the building's interior had quieted as if a switch had cut off its impulses of energy. No longer did lines of laden figures, moving out, pass empty-handed workmen coming in. Here and there about the ample spaces of the dismantled structure the humanity had been segregated in bewildered, waiting groups of silence.

In the library those members who had so obdurately claimed their last minutes of privilege stood apart near the front window. They were willing enough to leave now but were no longer at liberty to do so. Patrolmen stood at the door.

In respect to his white hairs, Jerry Cliff had been given a chair, and he sat stiffly upright in it, his hands clasped on the head of his walking stick, and his ruddy face sternly schooled. Only a few minutes had passed since Archibald had stood on the landing and now an ambulance surgeon bent over him and at his shoulder stood an elderly police sergeant with grizzled temples and a shrewd Irish face.

For a brief space of time that seemed endless a busy silence held there, through which one could hear the effortful, almost gasping breath of the wounded man. Then the doctor glanced up.

"We'd better get him to the hospital—and the operating table," he commented briefly.

Archibald's face was beaded with a deathly sweat, but his eyes were open and still held the light of consciousness. Police Sergeant Mahaffey plucked at the doctor's sleeve.

"I must ask him a question before it's too late," he urged in low but insistent voice. "He may go out in the ambulance. They often do."

The doctor hesitated, then reluctantly nodded:

"Make it brief," he ordered.

The elderly policeman bent low.

"Mr. Archibald," he said, "you know me. It's Mahaffey. Who was it? Who done this to you?"

The eyes of the wounded man moved slowly until they met those of the officer. His lips twisted into a crooked smile which was grimly uncommunicative. Then they spoke faintly:

"Not talking—now."

The sergeant bent still lower. He spoke again gently but with a desperate urgency:

"It's got to be now," he said, "or it may be too late."

Archibald turned his face away, the ironical smile still on his white lips and his eyes closed. His body relaxed and lay motionless as the doctor put out an arm to thrust the uniformed man aside.

"It's already too late," he said curtly. "This is a coroner's case now."

Except that moments of unwarned fatality are all long moments, like screen action run in slow motion,

the men who had been witnesses to this incredible mystery might have found time for surprise at the rapidity with which the law responded.

It was only about ten minutes after the first telephone call when Lieutenant Rossi from the district station arrived to take command of his uniformed men, already on the ground—and yet he found Archibald dead. It was almost as soon that men in plain clothes began presenting themselves on the scene with the air of impersonal and official readiness, district detectives and headquarters detectives, the coroner's representative, and hard on their heels the reporters, though for a while yet these latter agents of inquiry must wait.

The city's investigation was under way, and it was to J. G. Smith and Atwood that the officers first turned with their staccato volleying of questions.

"You say," demanded the lieutenant of Atwood, "that men came to visit Mr. Archibald by appointment. How many were there and who were they?"

"I can't say. I didn't see them when they came—or when they left. I probably wouldn't have known them, anyhow. They weren't members."

"How do you know that if you didn't see them?"

"I assume it. Mr. Archibald told me about noon that he was expecting some callers and when they came he wanted to be notified. If they had been members he would have mentioned them by name, or just left word with the door man."

"Did your door man let these men in? Where is he now?"

"He went over to the new building at one o'clock.

You see this is moving day. Officially we closed at two o'clock. The usual routine had ended here. There were workmen all over the place. Even some strangers have come in and wandered about."

"So to-day you don't know who came or went."

"Not since about noon. Ordinarily, of course, the door man registers members in and out on the board. Non-members are taken to the strangers' room—the small reception room there at the right of the door—and wait there to be announced."

"But these visitors of the dead man were not announced?"

"No, sir. I imagine Mr. Archibald must have met them himself at the door and taken them directly upstairs."

"How do you know any outsiders came at all?"

"I only know he expected visitors. I sent a boy up to see to the moving of chairs and tables from the card rooms, and he reported that it was all done except in Number Two. He said Mr. Archibald was talking to some one in there and told him to come back in twenty minutes."

"Send for that boy."

A young West Indian Negro in the club livery was brought into the library. He was somewhat excited and self-important but entirely straightforward of manner.

"I went through the card rooms with the moving men," he told his examiners, "and we cleared them all out except Number Two. The door was closed and I heard voices inside so I knocked. Mr. Archibald opened the door and held it ajar."

The lieutenant nodded.

"Did he seem excited? Did you notice anything unusual about him?"

"No, sir. He was smiling and he handed me a quarter. 'All right,' he said to me. 'Give me twenty minutes more and I'll be out of your way.' "

"You didn't see who else was there—or how many?"

"No, sir; the door wasn't open wide enough."

The police officer nodded again, then turned to Atwood.

"Let's see that room," he directed.

But the room bore no evidence of excitement. There were no cards in evidence nor glasses. Palpably, Mr. Archibald had offered his guests no entertainment beyond conversation. If this room were to reveal any secrets it would be later when, with their powder and brushes and cameras the finger-print men had made their exhaustive examinations.

Outside in the hall again Lieutenant Rossi turned to a rear staircase.

"Where does this come out below?" he inquired.

"There's a side door at the bottom. Gentlemen who park their cars in the cross street often use it. You'll find a bulletin on the board out there asking members who go and come that way to give notice to the door man so he can register them in and out."

"Apparently," the officer made dry observation, "the murderers didn't obey that rule—or maybe they didn't read the bulletin."

The rigid questioning of servants and workmen followed and was barren of results. No one seemed

to have seen or identified anyone going or coming upon whom suspicion might rest.

"Sergeant," suggested Lieutenant Rossi to old Mahaffey when the two were together again at the station house, "you were there before he died. Did you get anything from the man himself—any impression or hunch?"

The grizzled Irishman wrinkled his forehead in a studious concentration, and finally shook his head.

"Not even a hunch, Loot—unless it was——"

"Unless it was what, Mahaffey?" prompted his superior.

"Well, sir," said Mahaffey thoughtfully, "that was queer, too, his shutting up so tight when we asked him who did it. That was queer for a gentleman of his sort. You'd look for it from a gun or a racketeer—but it seemed funny from him."

Lieutenant Rossi spoke thoughtfully:

"Well, I don't know," he answered. "My idea is that he wouldn't talk because he couldn't talk."

Out on the streets the boys were selling papers whose headlines announced with loose accuracy:

MURDER IN MILLIONAIRES' CLUB

CHAPTER II

In the otherwise empty rooms which had until so recently been the town residence of Clem W. Archibald a big-bodied man strode about with eyes narrowed to preoccupation. This man had in him and about him something of the paradoxical. Though he was indubitably well dressed he wore his clothes with a seeming of entire carelessness, and though he was big of stature he carried his height and breadth in such a balance that only by comparison with others did one realize the fullness of his proportions.

His resolute face wore the stamp of a steady composure, and looking into it one thought instinctively of a man who has lived an outdoor life. Any casual observer might easily have missed the guess that this was Inspector Crandall, who headed the detective bureau of the city of New York.

Now he paused and stuffed tobacco into the bowl of his blunt pipe with the flat head of a silver pencil. He was looking studiously around the room in which he stood; the living room of a penthouse atop a tall apartment building which had been one of the real estate holdings of the murder victim.

If a man's living quarters give a reflection of himself, mused the detective, here was mirrored much of robust activity. The hunting trophies that adorned the place spoke of days and nights spent under far

and open skies. Engraved plates gave data, including always the statement: *Shot by C. W. A.,* and a man does not shoot Rocky Mountain goats and leopards without trekking wide distances between his camp fires.

There was a painting of the lustrous chestnut colt Volatile, a one-time winner of Metropolitan Handicap, and the boy in the saddle wore the silks of Archibald's stable. Since the turfman had dispersed his racing plant some years back, Crandall recalled, he had contented himself with playing the horses of other owners, but he had still held the reputation of a plunger whose wagers ran to staggering figures. So, too, he had played the stock markets for princely profits and sensational losses.

But it was the collection of framed photographs about the walls that most engaged the attention of the inspector. After all, these were more personal notes than the rest. They spoke of a man's companionships, and a man's companionships speak of the man.

But these scraps of pictorial evidence were confusing, mingling, as they did, men prominent in business and in the professions with pugilists, turfmen, and even a few professional gamblers of picturesque notability. Naturally there were women, too; women of the stage ranging from a few with the reputation of stardom to a larger sprinkling of those blessed with pulchritude, but as yet no greater distinction.

"Well, that's all right," mused Crandall. "He was a bachelor and made no pretense of a puritan code. He was always looking for a kick out of life; only—"

the inspector's brow gathered in meditative wrinkles —"only somehow I get the hunch that this big boy was shy of class. Funny how little is known in New York of men whose names are always in the papers." From the centre of the room the investigator swung his eyes slowly to sweep the four walls and the spaces between them.

"Yes," he told himself, "I can't get away from the notion that this bird was more of a sport than a sportsman. For all the newspapers harping on 'Murder in High Life,' I've got a hunch that there's a low-life angle to this thing and that that angle applies to the victim as well as the killers."

The telephone jangled and Crandall took up the bracket instrument from the centre table. For a moment he listened, than directed curtly:

"Send her up."

He passed out into the small formal garden that graced the roof. There was a fine late afternoon view across the top of the town with the broken glint of rivers to right and left and, far southward, a strip of bay, its distant edge whitened by sun and haze to the sharpness of a whetted blade.

When the door of the elevator superstructure opened, the inspector stepped forward and greeted a woman whom he had not seen before, though she had asked an appointment with him over the telephone.

She was a young woman, dark haired and deep eyed, and her comeliness was that of youth and health, as well as of fine, if generously modelled, features. Such beauty as this, thought Crandall, would screen

well. It held the challenge of vitality and was not of that fragile delicacy which is partly lost under the Kleig glare or across the footlights.

She was dressed more quietly than her somewhat gorgeous colouring might have warranted, and yet she was certainly not in mourning. Crandall hastily decided that such a subdued ensemble of costume was not habitual and that it sought to express a sort of unofficial grief.

'My name is Millicent Jasper," the visitor told him gravely, "and I asked for an appointment because—" she paused, then went steadily on—"because I wanted to talk to you about this terrible thing. Have you found out who murdered him yet?"

"Not yet," the head of the detective bureau answered slowly. "We're still mystified, but we are at work and we hope for early results. Are you a relative of Mr. Archibald?"

The young woman shook her head. She carried herself well and with a dignity which seemed to bespeak an aristocratic pride holding its check on deep emotion.

"No, I'm only a friend," she answered quietly; then, as if impulsively resolving on entire candour, she added, "but we were engaged to be married."

"Oh." The inspector made his brief reply with a tone of deferential sympathy, and then pointed to the door of the penthouse. "Suppose we talk inside," he suggested.

Back in the living room, the girl halted and stood looking around the place in a sort of stricken silence which the detective forebore to interrupt. Her cheeks

paled and one hand went to her breast as though she were controlling with a strong effort, a surge of feeling which threatened to overcome her.

Her eyes went in a journey of distress about the walls and came to rest upon an elaborately framed portrait on the piano. It was a portrait of herself.

"I had been looking at that photograph," Crandall told her gravely. "It is inscribed only, *The Nameless Lady*. I have been wondering who the original might be."

"It was taken only a week ago," she answered. "*The Nameless Lady* is the title of a musical comedy I was going to play in."

Crandall nodded.

"So you are an actress. I don't remember seeing any anouncement of this piece."

"It hadn't gotten that far," Miss Jasper admitted. "It was just being cast. It hadn't gone into regular rehearsal yet."

"I take it," suggested the inspector politely, "that you were to have the title rôle?"

The girl nodded her head, and her slim throat worked convulsively.

"Who was to be the producer?" asked the man, and she answered in a dull monotone,

"The Hendricks—but Mr. Archibald was really behind it. Now he's dead."

"You say," Crandall questioned her quietly, "that you were going to marry Mr. Archibald. Was that to be at once?"

"No, after I'd played out the season. You see, I

was ambitious to make good before I gave up my career. I felt sure I could if I had the chance, and until now I'd never really had it."

"You are new to Broadway, then?"

She nodded dismally.

"Except for a few small parts I haven't played in New York."

"So Mr. Archibald was to give you your chance of artistic recognition—and when you had satisfied yourself with a reasonable triumph you were to leave the stage and become his wife?"

"Yes. He wanted me to marry him at once—but I had to make good first and—he understood."

The inspector was standing and looking down on the young woman who talked wearily from her chair. He nodded his head and crammed his hands into his trousers pocket.

"Mr. Archibald seems to have left no will and no near relatives." He spoke gravely, then looked straight at the girl as he added with a manner of impulsiveness, "You had a great deal to lose by his death, didn't you?"

She covered her face with her hands for a moment and shuddered; then she straightened her sagging shoulders and nodded.

"Everything," she declared. "My life with him—my career—everything."

"Your career? Does his death cost you that, too?" he questioned, and again she inclined her head.

"The Hendricks were doubting Thomases from the first," she explained. "They doubted the show it-

self and they doubted my ability to get over in it. Now I guess they won't go on with it. Mr. Archibald had to keep driving them."

"You mean he kept their courage up with his money?"

"With his money and his energy both. He was that kind. What he undertook, he accomplished."

"Except," commented Crandall, as though speaking to himself, "where death intervened." He remained standing silently for an interval, then inquired, "Just why did you seek this appointment with me, Miss Jasper?"

For a moment she did not answer; then she looked up at him with serious eyes.

"I knew from the papers that you were questioning everyone who knew him well," she said, "and no one knew him better or loved him better than I. So I came to talk with you before you sent for me."

The inspector's nod was understanding.

Suddenly the woman's dark eyes blazed and she clenched her hands into fists.

"Above all, I want to see his murderers punished," she broke out hysterically. "If I can help in that——"

"Perhaps you can," Crandall assured her. "Do you know of any enemies he might have feared?"

She was controlled again as she replied:

"No. Everyone seemed to like him."

"You were with him, as you say, a good bit—along Broadway. Did you meet or talk with anyone there upon whom your suspicions might rest?"

The young woman seemed to be thinking back, earnestly searching her memory.

"No," she asserted at last. "He seemed to know everyone—all kinds of people—but they all seemed to be his friends."

"He never mentioned any apprehension of violence?"

"Oh, no, but then he wouldn't do that. He didn't know what fear was."

The inspector remained thoughtfully silent for a space, then he inquired in a matter-of-fact voice:

"Miss Jasper, you say that you were engaged to Mr. Archibald, and that he was backing this theatrical venture in which you were to be starred or featured. Did he also finance you in other ways—more personally?"

The young woman met the detective's straight eyes, and her own were no less direct of gaze.

"He gave me presents—lots of them," she said.

"Of what nature—money as well as other things?"

"Yes. He wanted me to live comfortably. There were checks—a good many checks."

"You say you want to help the police. I am taking you at your word even to the point of being personal. Did he ever discuss making a will—and naming you as a beneficiary?"

She shook her head sadly.

"He talked of it, yes—but he had never done it. There seemed plenty of time and he thought so little of death."

"You say you are comparatively new to Broadway. Where do you come from, Miss Jasper?"

She hesitated a moment before her answer.

"From Tennessee. My family were bitterly op-

posed to my going on the stage. It's an old family with old-fashioned ideas."

"And the name is Jasper?"

"Oh, no, Crenshaw. The Jasper is only a stage name."

"I see. Now comes a question which is bluntly personal, Miss Jasper, yet necessary. This is a murder investigation, you know. You speak of your close and intimate relationship to the dead man. You speak also of coming from a Southern family still holding to strictly conventional principles."

"Yes."

"Was there anything real or seeming in this relationship which the men of such a family as yours might have resented and sought to punish?"

The woman held his eyes and decisively shook her head.

"No," she answered firmly. "As far as that goes I have no brothers and my father is dead. The relatives who objected to Broadway were all women."

Crandall nodded as he absent-mindedly crammed at his pipe bowl with his flat pencil head, then he observed slowly, "You have very completely mastered your Tennessee accent, haven't you, Miss Jasper?"

She laughed.

"I'm an actress," she reminded him, "and besides, that Southern accent isn't as clinging as you Northerners fancy it.

"No," he agreed, "I'm not always discovered myself—as your calling me a Northerner indicates."

"You! You're not a Southerner, are you?"

"I'm from Tennessee," he responded quietly, "and I believe I have some distant Crenshaw cousins. So, you see, if you're of that blood you have a claim on me, not only as a policeman but as a sort of kinsman."

The young woman sat for a moment searching his eyes with a keen scrutiny, then ever so slightly her lips tightened.

"I haven't kept in very close touch with my family of late," she remarked. "We don't see things alike." After a moment's pause which he did not break she went on: "You don't talk like a Southerner, but you don't talk like a policeman, either, as far as that goes. I guess you've been here long enough to have lived down certain Southern prejudices, yourself. You can understand a girl's wanting a career, can't you?"

"Decidedly," he assured her, and then for a moment he stood contemplating her with a benevolent gravity, after which he commented somewhat surprisingly, "And you are such a good actress, too."

Miss Jasper raised her brows.

"But you haven't seen my work," she reminded him; "so that's empty flattery, after all."

"I haven't seen your work in a part," he corrected her, "but it's my job to appraise people. I appraise you as having the gift. I might even venture to offer you advice about the sort of work I believe you are best—and worst—fitted for."

"That's mighty good of you," she assured him, and her breath was coming a bit faster than when she had been sitting with her hands in her lap, a picture of bereavement.

He nodded.

"I think your greatest danger is in taking parts where you are miscast."

"That's true of everybody," she told him.

He let his disconcertingly steady eyes dwell on her for a space of silence, then he said quietly:

"For one thing, you are miscast in the rôle of fencing dishonestly with the police, Miss Jasper. You don't know that game well enough to swing it, and you're at a disadvantage. You're out of character, too, as a Tennessean."

The words and tone were pitched to so even and so meditative a tempo that for a moment or two the young woman sat staring at him with incredulous eyes. Then the colour rushed hotly into her cheeks and flamed there while her eyes blazed with the chagrin and fury and fear of a cornered creature.

She rose, and her chin came up indignantly. The picture she presented of insulted dignity would have been superb but for the moment of brittle hardness and self-betrayal which had preceded and defeated it.

She seemed to realize that tactical disaster, and after a breathing space she abandoned the posture and changed like one throwing off the disguise of a domino. Her lips curled and her eyes were agate hard with defiance. The simple dignity fell away from her and left her a trembling termagant in white-hot rage.

"My God!" she exclaimed in strident disgust and confession, "why didn't I make it Oklahoma or Saskatchewan? Well, Mr. Inspector, what now?"

The detective's expression did not alter.

"Oklahoma or Saskatchewan would have been the

same in the end," he assured her. "We haven't gone far yet with unravelling this mystery, but we've run through the routine, and part of the routine is always, 'look for the lady.' "

"What have you found out, then—about the lady?"

"That you come from Brooklyn. That you have been a bit of a gold digger. That you were presumably the dead man's mistress—and that in the last six months he's lavished a good bit of money on you."

Millicent Jasper deserved due credit. She neither flew into shrewish rage nor collapsed into a weak hysteria. She merely stiffened and froze into an ironic hardness.

"Do those things make me a suspect?" she inquired icily, and the inspector shook his head.

"No, not necessarily, though volunteer liars invite suspicion. If you were a real and practical criminal mixing in a murder job you would have been cleverer. You wouldn't have come to me of your own accord with lies that were so easy to nail. You'd have made a better showing. Even dumb dicks can check up on simple information."

"Such as?" she inquired with the coolness of a forced bravado.

"Such as a falsified family name and family residence. Those are easy things to verify or disprove. Smart pugs don't lead with their chins and neither do smart crooks."

Just as she had dropped her mantle of bereaved dignity, so now he dropped his manner of deference.

"No, sister," he told her firmly, though without

heat, "as I said, you know your stuff—when you're not miscast. I hate to seem ungallant, yet I must say I make you out to be—beautiful but dumb."

"I can bear that," she informed him, "so long as you don't make me out a subject for your third degree."

He nodded.

"I don't figure you in on the Archibald job," he repeated, "for what seems to me a good and valid reason. You said at the outset you figured I'd question you, so you beat me to it. If you'd been cleverer that would have been O.K. As a matter of fact, I'd looked you up as thoroughly as I could, and as a suspicious character I give you out—so far. You seem to have had nothing to gain by this man's death—and a good bit to lose."

"God knows that part of it is true," she exclaimed. Then with a mercenary callousness she suggested, "Well, suppose I can prove I was his common-law wife? What about that?"

"Take that to a lawyer," he advised her coolly. "It's not in my province. You came to me to feel me out and see what I knew. That's one of the many things I don't know."

"All right," replied Miss Jasper. "And now that we've both made our little plays, if I'm free to leave here on my own power I'll take my exit."

"For the present," Crandall informed her, "you're at liberty to do that. It may be needful later on to ask bond of you as a material witness. It may be advisable to keep an eye on you meanwhile. At the moment your road is open."

"Suppose I should decide to go back and visit our mutual relatives in Tennessee—how about that?" She put her inquiry impudently, and he gave her his answer blandly:

"Try it and see."

Indeed his smile was entirely urbane as she rose and he accompanied her to the elevator and bowed her in. After that he went back into the room and stood there with a satisfied grin on his likable face.

It was only a few minutes later when the door opened and Sergeant Mahaffey of the Broadway squad entered.

"You wanted me, sir?" he inquired, and the inspector nodded.

"Since Archibald's death," he began, "the papers have given the public enough columns of complimentary biography to reach, if laid end to end, from somewhere to somewhere else. All that history has been of the routine sort. A murder in high life is better than one with an unimportant victim."

The sergeant nodded, but his face was not yet clear with understanding.

"Maybe I'm dumb not to get you, Skipper," he admitted, "but it *was* a murder in high life, wasn't it? A millionaire bumped off in a swell club. What else can you call it?"

The shrewd old face clouded as Mahaffey added dolorously:

"An' that two days back an' we ain't got nowheres yet."

"Nowhere much," admitted Crandall. "If every man in that card room had had his hands sewed tight

in his pockets, they couldn't have left less finger printing behind them. If they had been ghosts they couldn't have faded out and left less trace."

"It's the fine upstandin' figure of a man he was," observed the sergeant reminiscently. "Small wonder, indeed, the town's all hopped up about his gettin' the works like some common gun."

"You'd seen him often along Broadway, Mahaffey," suggested the head of the detective bureau. "What was your own impression of him?"

"A fine, open-handed gentleman, sir, to the tips of his gloves," came the prompt tribute.

"A big successful business man in the daytime and a tired business man at night. It's the likes of him that they put on the girl and whoopee shows for."

Crandall was standing with his hands deep in his trousers pockets. Now he nodded, and drawing his silver pencil from his breast pocket, crammed at the tobacco in his pipe bowl; then he spoke with a crisp decisiveness:

"You are a Broadway squadder, Mahaffey, and you know the main stem as well as any man on the force. I want you to work on an angle of this case that we can't announce or even admit we are considering." The detective head smiled grimly. "While the rest of us proceed with the investigation of a murder in high life I want you to go ahead precisely as if Clem W. Archibald had a police record, precisely as if he were a bird you'd seen in the morning line-up and whose picture and finger prints were on file."

The old sergeant's shrewd eyes clouded gravely and once more his face took on its vague perplexity.

"You mean, sir, I'm to go after his record the same fashion as if he trained with some mob?"

The inspector nodded.

"Right. I mean that we must attack this case from every possible angle. Somebody killed him. Somebody had a motive. In his acquaintanceships along Broadway he must have had some underworld contacts. Your job is to work it from that angle. It will take some doing."

"Is that all, sir?"

"That's all and it's plenty, as you'll find out before you get through."

CHAPTER III

In a city which religiously observes the idea of regions and zones a law firm which elected to leave the cañons flanking lower Broadway to establish itself in upper Fifth Avenue was violating an almost mandatory tradition.

So armed and accoutred with established reputation was the firm of Smith & Welligan that it could afford to ignore such precedents of custom with full assurance that to the door on which its name was inscribed, there would its clients find the way. These lawyers were beyond the need of placing themselves at any crossroads of legal traffic.

It was, therefore, to the twentieth floor of the Delaware Building, newly risen, on a site which had until quite recent years remained sacred to residential purposes, that a small group of important gentlemen came two days after the city had been startled and outraged by the Archibald murder.

This group included a bishop whose kindly face was full of tolerance and a layman whose eyes burned with that zealous fire which, in other ages, has kindled fagots at the stake.

In the reception room this handful of notables paused, and from her place at the typing table Olivia Cary saw them and, recognizing their importance, rose to receive them with a tactful deference.

"We want to see Mr. Smith," announced John Hardaway, of the unbending manner, and the girl smiled with disarming courtesy as she inquired quietly:

"Did you have an appointment?"

It was the bishop who interposed.

"No, but we hoped that Mr. Smith could grant us a little time, even if only enough to arrange for a future conference."

Mr. Hardaway frowned impatiently and repressed his impulse to speak in terms of stiffer insistence.

"I'm sure Mr. Smith will see you if it's possible," Olivia Cary told them. "I'll try to keep you waiting as short a time as possible."

It was after the briefest of delays that the group was ushered into the private office bearing the name

J. G. SMITH

and they found the attorney standing behind his table with a welcoming smile on his lean but patrician face.

Evidently this committee had not definitely chosen its spokesman in advance, for when the bishop made his beginning, "We are here, Mr. Smith, representing several civic organizations," his companion Hardaway interrupted him with brusque impatience.

"More than that," he declared, "it is not going too far to say we are here in the name of an outraged citizenry."

J. G. Smith continued to smile quietly.

"I trust, gentlemen," he suggested, "that it is not I who have outraged the citizenry?"

"We are here," Hardaway told him, ignoring what he regarded as an ill-timed facetiousness, "to retain your firm in a most important employment. We have picked you out of the whole bar of New York after a careful consideration."

Smith bowed slightly in acknowledgment of the tribute, and now it was the bishop who spoke.

"The organizations which have sent us to you, Mr. Smith, are representative, in a broad sense, of the civic spirit. They are eager to enlist your aid in investigating and remedying conditions in this city which are rapidly becoming intolerable."

"Which have already become intolerable," Hardaway offered correction. "We refer to this epidemic of crime, to a reign of terror and bloodshed at the hands of infamous and unpunished criminals."

J. G. Smith spread his hands in a gesture of mild protest.

"I'm afraid that let's me out, gentlemen," he answered gravely. "I'm not a criminal lawyer."

"We don't want a criminal lawyer," protested Hardaway explosively. "Criminal lawyers, police, public prosecutors, they are interlocked like hands washing each other—only they don't get each other clean. We want an incorruptible agency from outside. We want brains and character that are not bound hand and foot in any web of red tape or any paralysis of politics."

"We want, above all," came the bishop's milder suggestion, "a law firm whose name carries the guarantee of the sterling mark. In short, we want you. It's

a call to the colours of order and decency in warfare on arrogant vice."

J. G. Smith shook his head gravely.

"You make it difficult for me to refuse you, gentlemen. A man may not lightly fail to respond to a call couched in such terms—yet decline I must."

"Decline you must not," came Hardaway's peremptory contradiction. "You are being drafted by a public need."

"There are two excellent reasons why I must still decline," Smith told them. "The first I have stated. I am not a criminal lawyer, and this is work for the man more familiar than I with that branch of practice. The second reason is that I cannot spare the time."

"As to your first objection, you know law in the broadest sense, even if you chose to specialize in corporation practice," argued Hardaway more temperately. "You're a good enough criminal lawyer to suit us, and we've canvassed the field with some care."

"At all events hear us out before you seal your refusal," urged the bishop, and with a serious face. "We don't come as spokesmen for fanatical reform bodies. We speak for a sober citizenry seeking deliverance."

"And we speak when the regularly constituted authorities have failed us," added Hardaway.

"Until now the public has remained lamentably callous to existing conditions," interposed the bishop. "At last it is aroused. Of course murder is murder, even where men fall dead only in feuds between rival gangs of criminals. We have read in our newspapers day after day of men done to death with pistols and

machine guns; of men shot down in public highways; of other men seized and held for ransom. Yet always, because these men have been supposed malefactors, the public has, in effect, condoned the hideous business."

"That's not so strange," announced Hardaway with a surprising contradictoriness. "That much of it may be a good riddance of bad rubbish. The rat-killing doesn't excite me unduly so long as it's limited to rats killings rats. I can get the police point of view on that, but when the desperadoes cross the deadline and challenge decent society——"

"I suppose you are coming to the murder of Clem Archibald?" suggested Smith soberly, as the stern-faced man paused for breath, and he was answered with a vigorous nod.

"As I've read of these crimes," Hardaway made indignant assertion, "I've more than once asked myself the question, 'What's to prevent them from going farther?' I myself am known to have enough money to afford a ransom in preference to death. I have asked myself, 'What is to prevent these damned brutes from carrying me out of my own house and taking me for a ride?' I have asked myself that question and now they have insolently answered me. They have gone into one of the best known clubs in town and murdered a citizen of unchallenged standing. And a man's club is his home."

Once more the excited speaker had need to pause and refill his deep chest with air.

"We have been to the police and to the district attorney," suggested a voice from the background.

"We came away with small comfort. There almost seemed to be a veiled hostility between these supposed partners in law enforcement, a sort of futile passing the buck back and forth."

"The police had nothing to report," snorted the outraged Hardaway, "and the gentlemen of the district attorney's office pointed their fingers accusingly at headquarters. They were all busy alibi-ing themselves. As for us we say, 'A plague on both your houses.' The forces we pay for protection are washouts—they are duds."

"So," added the bishop appealingly, "we come to you. You are a member of the Sportsman's Club. But for the grace of God this thing might have happened to you."

"Yes," replied the lawyer gravely, "I'm a member and I was there at the time of the Archibald shooting. I helped to carry him from the place where he fell to the couch where he died. As for Archibald himself, I know very little about him. He was rich and a spender. His name was often in the papers. He was ostensibly well known and in all essentials wholly unknown."

"We have stated our case," declared the bishop regretfully, "and we have pinned our hopes on you."

"Gentlemen," declared Smith, "fights of this sort have rarely succeeded. The reason is not far to seek. We are outsiders. After all, we must work through the machinery of the law and our intervention will scarcely endear us to the gentlemen in office. Still I'm not averse to a good fight and you tempt me. However, I am a busy man."

"Damn the records of the past," railed Hardaway. "If you go into this it will be differently done. As for being busy, you are an energetic man. One more job——"

"It's not merely a job. It's a long campaign and a hard one. I am shortly leaving for Kentucky on matters of prime importance. My first duties are to those clients I already have."

"Send someone else to Kentucky," directed Hardaway, with admirable simplicity, and the lawyer smiled.

"I have a lieutenant on the ground," he said, "but he can only break the ground for me."

"Naturally," Hardaway made reluctant admission, "you can't neglect your incurred responsibilities. But you're notoriously a glutton for work, Smith." He paused, then added hopefully, "If necessary, we could employ associate counsel of your own choice to lighten the work for you. After all, what we most want of you is your supervision—and the great value of your name. It would put your co-workers on their mettle."

"At least," added the bishop, "permit us to report back that you are favourably considering the matter. We must make a statement to our principals and to the press. We would like to include that much."

Smith sat rapping lightly on his desk with his tapering fingers; then he glanced up and nodded decisively.

"You may say for me," he announced, "that I am much gratified at being chosen, and that, if I can adjust my schedule, I will be with you."

On the following morning when J. G. Smith ar-

rived at his office Miss Cary rose and followed him into his private room.

Outside at her typing table this young woman had seemed a competent stenographer. Her personal loveliness was arresting, and there was about her the undeniable stamp of class, but these were qualities shared with her by many young business women of the day.

Inside the sanctum, however, she dropped something of the disciplined self-repression which she wore outside. Her personality became more positive, more colourful, and the elderly lawyer's manner to her was distinctly paternal.

This was not strange, for Olivia Cary was a niece of Mr. Welligan, the junior member of the firm, and before her employment she had been like a niece or daughter to the senior member as well. After her graduation from college she had taken up the study of law, and outside of office hours she was wholesomely enthusiastic about the more frivolous enjoyments of life. Inside those hours she was ambitious, tactful, and alertly competent so that, besides acting as a sort of liaison officer between the inner sanctum and the reception room, she enjoyed a confidential relation to the affairs of the firm.

"I suppose you have read," began the attorney with a smile, "that we are taking on new responsibilities and girding our loins for battle with the hosts of the unrighteous."

"I read that you had been approached, and that you were considering acceptance."

"I'm afraid I've let myself in for it, and I shall

make some enemies. Civilian warriors are apt to tread on the toes of official martinets."

The girl nodded her dark head gravely, and her eyes clouded.

"I've been thinking of that," she said seriously; "and I have some letters here."

She laid a sheaf of envelopes on his desk, but she separated three from the others and held them in her hand.

Smith was leaning back in his chair with a fresh cigarette between his fingers. Like many men who accomplish prodigious amounts of work, he had the occasional and false appearance of laziness, the gift of momentary relaxation.

"Read them to me, if you don't mind," he suggested, and the girl took up the first.

"This is from the district attorney," she told him. "It's brief. It says:

"I have read of your selection to aid in a concerted drive on the alleged epidemic of crime in New York, and I congratulate the organizations behind you upon your selection. Rest assured of the full coöperation of my office."

"Very courteous and very cautious," commented the lawyer. "So the crime is only alleged. The D. A. is peeved but polite. Between the lines I seem to read, 'Who the devil let you in?' Let's have the next tribute."

"The next," said the girl, "is from the police commissioner. Here it is:

"The announcement of your having been approached by various civic and reform organizations has just been brought to my

attention. Permit me to extend to you the utmost assistance of this department."

"The commissioner," smiled Smith, "is also a little less than ecstatic. Let us get on with the mash notes."

Olivia Cary's smooth forehead puckered and a shadow of worry clouded her clear eyes.

"This one is anonymous—and I don't like it," she made prefatory announcement. "It's typed and it looks to me as if a good operator had intentionally scattered mistakes through it."

She paused as the lawyer nodded; then she read:

"For your own good lay off this piety racket. This little bout is between professionals. If amateurs mix in they may get hurt. Nobody loves a meddler."

Smith laughed aloud.

"That is candid advice even if it is the typical crank effusion," he said. "Now if it were genuine it might indicate an interesting rapport between the high commissioners of crime and the gentlemen who wear badges."

"But it may be genuine," she argued anxiously.

Smith nodded and tossed away his cigarette.

"Possible, but unimportant," he ruled briefly. "I begin to be interested. I hope I can take on the job."

"Then you aren't decided yet?"

"I can't decide," he told her gravely, "until I learn whether I can spare the time. This Kentucky business——"

He paused and noticed that at the words she flushed slightly, and her eyes took on a fresh glow of

interest. Pretending not to see that, he continued:

"This Kentucky business comes first. I must go there."

"Oh," she said, and fell silent; then after a moment she claimed her prerogative as something other than a mere employee, and put a question:

"Isn't Carl getting results down there?"

Again Smith laughed, and bending forward, patted her hand. As he did so her flush deepened.

"Carl Warren's efficiency is above par," he assured her. "There's no kick on Carl. This firm thinks as highly of him as you do—even if not in just the same way. But," his forehead drew into a thoughtful frown, "but none the less I must go there myself."

CHAPTER IV

OLIVIA CARY rose from her chair and made no effort to pursue the topic of Carl Warren and his capabilities, but the lawyer leaned forward with his elbows on the desk and directed:

"Sit down a moment. I want to talk about the Kentucky business, if only for the purpose of thinking aloud. You know what the job is there: developing natural resources of a large scope in a section of the Cumberlands where life has stood still for two hundred years and more—opening to industry a rich and unexploited field."

"Yes," she said quietly, "I feel almost as if I had been there." Then she added more slowly, "Carl has written me about it."

"So," he exclaimed with a twinkle in his eyes, "you have been receiving private and exclusive reports from our field man, have you—reports which have been held out on me?"

Having recovered from her first embarrassment, the girl had become immune to his teasing, a teasing to which she had been accustomed from childhood, but she answered gravely:

"What he wrote me wouldn't do the firm much good. You see Carl serves two masters. Besides his devotion to the law, he has a yearning to write—

and he's been getting it out of his system by sending me a sort of travelogue."

"Oh, I see. Do you find it interesting?"

"Indeed I do. He really writes well, and you can see that the strange quaintness of that life has gotten under his skin. He feels the spell of a country that the mountains have shut in like a stagnant mill pond for two centuries. He finds a people stranded and unchanged, mixing up the English of Shakespeare with the crudest dialect. He describes a land without roads where you travel on muleback or in a 'jolt wagon' and where the folk are generous and simple and God-fearing, yet kill one another from ambush. He says he feels as if he had stepped back into the days of Daniel Boone."

The girl had been swept on by her interest. Now she stopped abruptly and Smith nodded his head.

"And that is the country," he mused, "into which we seek to thrust railways and open industry." He paused a moment, then went on: "Carl has done all I sent him to do and done it well, but after all, he can only make a beginning for me. I must find a man down there for myself. Even our excellent, our superlative Carl, couldn't yet do that for me."

"Couldn't find a man, you mean?"

"No, because I can't give that man's name, address, or description. I don't even know with certainty that there is such a man. All I could say is that I need someone who knows the physical aspects of the terrain to its last detail; who carries maps and rural statistics in his mind as only the native—and the exceptional native—can. It's the sort of thing that

outsiders could learn only by long engineering investigations. I want to find a human short cut to that long problem—and its solution."

He paused, then continued:

"The human needle I'm going to that haystack to search for must be more than that, though. He must know the human equations of his fellow hillsmen and turn them to account. He must be able to focus his mind to such wide perspectives that he can grasp the essentials of our entire undertaking. In short, he must combine the native mind at its keenest with the viewpoint of the outer world." He shook his head dubiously as he added: "And you have need to remember that to these people men from the next county are 'furriners' and men from the lowlands are 'outlanders.' "

"It's a large order," mused Olivia Cary.

"Yes, it's a large order," he repeated. "Carl is winnowing out the chaff for me and it's a man's job, but it takes an older head and a maturer judgment than his to do the rest. That hunt for an unknown man has the right of way—even over girding myself in the armour of a civic crusade."

The girl went back to her desk, and Smith reached for a sheaf of paper, yet had he been gifted with the occult power of seeing through walls and floors and gathering together the disconnected strands of chance, he need not have reached farther for the unusual man he sought than the building in which he sat.

Work involving far-reaching results and responsibilities lay under his directing hand, and he stood at

a juncture at which he needed a human being uniting in himself paradoxical contrasts of nature, place, and ability. Yet while he planned to travel a thousand miles for the commencement of his search, a man who might have answered his unusual requirements was just leaving another office of the Delaware Building. Moreover, so close was the pinch of hunger encroaching on this man that he would have seized any employment the attorney had proffered him as greedily as a starving dog seizes a chop bone.

Only by straining that magic of coincidence with which life often plays, could events have caused the path of J. G. Smith, attorney at law, to cross that of Dawes Fleetwell, born and reared on the rocky windings of Bear Wallow Creek, and chance did not now so strain its magic.

Even had these two men been brought face to face there was nothing in the appearance of Dawes Fleetwell to suggest that he was the human anomaly in search of whom Smith was going to Kentucky. There was, on the contrary, everything in his outward seeming to declare him the antithesis of such a man.

On the third floor of the Delaware Building a considerable stretch of rooms bore, on its entrance door, the legend:

HEIMSTEIN AND BROPHY, THEATRICAL EMPLOYMENT BUREAU

and oddly enough, this establishment shared one point of similarity with the law offices of Smith and Welligan. It was off the beaten paths of similar

establishments, most of which clung closer to the fringes of Longacre Square and the milling stampede of Broadway.

In the main waiting room of that establishment brooded an air of anxious suspense and sometimes in the drooping shoulders of a figure, retiring toward the exit, there was the hint of defeat and despair. It was a place where many are called and few are chosen.

Here, day after day, a small congregation of care-worn Thespians sat around the walls, seeking to veil, with the hauteur of off-stage acting, the heaviness of spirit with which they strove to exchange their status of "at liberty" for that of "engaged."

Here one saw the pathos of much counterfeit importance being rung on the counter and discarded as spurious, and occasionally that pathos was heightened by contrast with the greeting accorded a man or woman of established success.

Here, while J. G. Smith sat seventeen stories higher up, seeking to accommodate his schedule to seemingly impossible combinations, the outer door of the agency opened and framed the figure of a man whose bearing and appearance were arresting.

Had this been a stage set and lighted for performance instead of so remote an anteroom to a theatre, this man who crossed its threshold could not have more calculatedly observed the difference between "walking on" and "making an entrance."

He came like a vagabond prince, though the vagabond portion of the description was not of his choosing. The Broadway finery of his attire had begun to show wear and aging beyond the concealment of

careful brushing and trimming. Palpably, the gentleman who bore himself with such a fine effrontery had for some weeks and months been "at liberty," but his hat was cocked at a jaunty angle, his half-soled shoes were spat-covered, and he twirled his walking stick with the debonair jauntiness of one who is not unmindful of his own unusual worth. He strode confidently to the desk and announced himself in a clear tone.

"I am Mr. Fleetwell. I have an appointment with Mr. Heimstein. Will you be good enough to take in my name?"

The young woman who sat as guardian of the inner door looked up, and before her disillusioned eyes all the darts of his bright personality fell away shivered as from a hard armour.

"An appointment?" she repeated vaguely, as her jaws worked industriously on chewing gum. "I have no memo of it, Mr.—Mr.—did you say Fleetwell?"

The man met her gaze imperturbably.

"I said Fleetwell, Dawes Fleetwell," he enlightened her. "If your memory fails to place me I am sure Mr. Heimstein's will not fail. He sent for me."

The young woman rose languidly but she had no need to open the door, for at that moment it swung from inside and Mr. Heimstein himself stood aside to permit a lady, whose name was electric-writ along Broadway, to sweep royally and smilingly out.

As he followed her over the threshold the eyes of Mr. Heimstein encountered the imposing masculine figure just beyond, and it cannot be said that they lighted with enthusiastic welcome. Having drawn

gallantly back to let the lady pass, Mr. Fleetwell thrust open the swinging gate that intervened and offered breezy greeting.

"Good-day, Mr. Heimstein."

The agent stood somewhat blankly returning the gaze of his forward visitor, then he nodded shortly.

"Mr.—er—Fleetwell." He groped for the name and grasped it uncertainly. "You wanted to see me about——" Again he paused blankly, and Fleetwell's smile was gracious as he prompted:

"About the part in *The Nameless Lady*. The old fiddler's contest number, you know. We talked it over last week."

"Oh, yes, I got you now." Heimstein stood stolidly barring the door. "Well, I'm sorry, Mr. Fleetwell, but that's off."

For an instant a wave of something like despair wrenched the heart and tightened the throat of the tall actor, but that was only an instinctive spasm, and the face at once altered to a resentful hauteur.

"Off?" demanded Fleetwell sternly. "But you gave me a definite answer. You had tried out and discarded a bunch of washouts for the part. You decided that I was the man they needed, didn't you? You were to send me over to the theatre to-day."

Mr. Heimstein spread his hands and shrugged his shoulders.

"It ain't that you don't fit the part, Mr. Fleetwell," he deigned to make explanation. "It's that the whole show has gone flooey on us. Don't you ever read the newspapers, Mr. Fleetwell? Ain't you seen that Mr. Archibald is dead?"

"Read the newspapers? What is Archibald to us?"

Being overbusy for extended conversation, Heimstein made it snappy.

"What is Mr. Archibald to us? He was the bank roll. I thought everybody knew Clem Archibald was backing that show. I thought everybody knew he'd been murdered. I thought everybody knew the Hendricks had dropped the thing flat and left it lay where it dropped. Is that my fault, I ask you? I should be blamed for that, Mr. Fleetwell? If I hear of anything else in your line——"

But Dawes Fleetwell had turned and was striding wrathfully toward the hall.

His eyes fell on the cuffs of his coat, and he could not escape the dismal realization that they were both glossed and fringed. Outside he stood brooding on the disaster which had come to him through the taking off of a man he had never seen. If he had ever read that man's name in the papers it had, from lack of interest, been shed from his memory. Now that man's death spelled, for him, something close to disaster.

Dawes Fleetwell descended to the street and had need to collect himself with a stern effort before he could start swinging along the avenue with the bearing of even a vagabond prince.

It was somewhat later that day that Inspector Crandall of the detective bureau came along Fifth Avenue, and walking at his side was Lieutenant Rossi of the district station. In the whole organization of the police department with its thousands of uniformed men and its hundreds of detectives, perhaps these two had most reason for feeling themselves the targets

of criticism, when an extraordinary crime remained unsolved.

Crandall was the more conspicuous of the two since he stood charged with the strategy and policy of the detective bureau, but Rossi had practical command of the precinct in which the crime had occurred, and that jurisdiction put squarely up to him the demand that he perform miracles where miracles were needed.

The inspector's face was outwardly tranquil since the inspector was a man who steadied rather than shook under the pressure of assault, but the more excitable features of the lieutenant's Latin face already bore seams of anxiety and stress.

"The papers have been pretty good to us so far," observed Crandall quietly. "They are holding their fire, but that can't last long. Soon they'll open up on us with all they've got. They'll demand our heads on a silver salver. They'll be bawling us out for a bunch of dumb dicks and we haven't any snappy come-back to give them."

Lieutenant Rossi growled his spirit-burdened assent.

"They'll go after the commissioner with wise-cracking editorials," he predicted gloomily, "and the commissioner will come right after you and me—with an ax."

"Unless," amended Crandall in an untroubled tone, "we deliver the goods. We're not through yet by the hell of a lot."

The two men were passing the door of the Delaware Building and Crandall halted.

"My tobacco pouch is empty," he said, "and the

lad at the cigar counter here carries my mixture. Let's step in a moment."

"Sure," assented the district officer, "but they sell pipe tobacco everywhere, don't they?"

"I'm fussy," explained his superior. "I smoke a mixture that's made by an old bird downtown. This is one of the places that have it."

Inside the entrance hall, which was large and ornate, there moved a sort of loose procession, going in, coming out, or standing for the moment at ease.

While Crandall strolled to the counter his companion stood moodily waiting, and as he waited he saw a figure emerge from an express elevator and move toward the street. Rossi had seen that figure last at the Sportsman's Club on the day of Archibald's murder. It was the corporation lawyer, Smith, who, according to report, was going to show up the police. Rossi frowned, and had Crandall had any means of guessing how the strands of fact and chance hung fluttering loose here just missing contact, he would have turned from the cigar counter where he stood with his back to the hallway.

For in that entrance hall at that moment were present not only the head of the detective bureau and the police lieutenant most directly charged with solving the Archibald mystery; not only also the lawyer who was being asked to enter the matter from the side lines, but also, moving unrecognized by eyes that were eagerly searching for him, the man who had instigated and engineered the assassination.

CHAPTER V

In her own room that evening Olivia Cary settled herself comfortably to read. It was neither book nor magazine which occupied her but a sheaf of hand-written pages. Some of them were done in pale ink on sheets of paper bearing the letterheads of country-town hotels; some of them were scrawled in pencil, and perhaps composed before the smoky hearth-stones of mountain cabins.

These things that I am writing you about happened a few years ago [Carl made prefatory comment], and my narrative is pieced together from gossip picked up here and there through the hills. A real writer could make a story of it, I'm sure, but if I give you the feel of the country I'll be satisfied.

The girl had paused there and smiled, then she had read on:

The man, Muir Bratchell, whom it all chiefly concerns, I did not get to meet myself when I was in his section. He was away at the state capital, but from all I learn he's a man Mr. Smith should meet and talk with. He knows these hills.

Olivia went on reading. In following her we may dismiss direct quotation and take the substance, even filling in some gaps of circumstances which must have remained empty for the young lawyer.

Had Dawes Fleetwell been born into a field of richer opportunity he might, from the outset, have won for himself the name of a brilliant scoundrel. Cramped and limited by the backwoods environment of the Kentucky Cumberlands, he succeeded only in rating as a smart rascal.

"In my day of time," said old "Uncle Jerry" Skrem, whose mill wheel creaked complainingly in the waters of Squabble Creek, "I've done met up with some right disable loaferers, but this Dawes Fleetwell, he p'int-blank exceeds ther measure. He's ther stand-roundin'-est, do-nothin'est man-person ever I seed or heered tell of, an' I'm a-comin' on ter be blond with age."

"But yit, Uncle Jerry, he ain't no man's fool, Dawes ain't," suggested "Ratankle" Tauber. "He contrives ter git him what he craves without disconfitin' hisself with no slavish work. I wishes I could edzact his ways an' means of doin' hit."

"Then all ye've got need ter do is ter steal—like Dawes does," announced Uncle Jerry sententiously. "When he went ter school he didn't nuver study his books, yit 'pears like he plumb soaked up all thar was inside 'em, kiver to kiver. I'm satisfied he had a fashion of robbin' ther minds of them other boys thet *did* study, the same as a man robs a bee-gum fer honey in June time."

Wagging his head sagely, the old miller enlarged upon his thesis.

"Jase Fanton was right nimble-witted up ter ther age of fifteen or sixteen, an' then all of a suddint-like he come on ter be a plumb idjit.

"He sot on ther same bench with Dawes at ther

schoolhouse an' I'm p'int-blank confident Dawes he robbed thet boy's wits like stealin' eggs outen a bird's nest."

"An' yit," suggested Ratankle, who was an incurable addict to the lure of argument, "hit 'pears kinderly cur'ous ef Dawes is jest pizen-mean an' no-'count fer a fust-class feller like Muir Bratchell ter consort with him ther fashion he does. Ef them two was twins they couldn't stick closter tergither. Hit's been thetaway ever since they was leetle shirt-tail tykes. Whosoever affronts either one of 'em hes got ther two ter fight."

"Yea, an' Muir's ther salt of the yarth," admitted Uncle Jerry warmly. "He's got as much genuwine worth in him es Dawes hes got triflin' rascality, an' I ain't got no means fer denotin' no greater lavish."

"Well, if each one of 'em 'lows ther sun rises an' sets in tother one, don't thet prove nothin', Uncle Jerry?"

"Hit proves, young man, thet ye ain't got no human information fer all yore schoolin'. Hit's ther differs betwixt them two thet welds 'em tergither—ther differs in nigh everything save jest two matters in common. They've both got survigrous ambition itchin' inside thar brains, an' they've both got survigrous smart brains fer hit ter itch in. But yit I looks ter see them two fall out some day, aye an' when thet comes ter pass, thar'll be a dire reckonin'. A plumb four-squar' honest feller an' a damn rascal kain't consort foriver without they does bust up. Hit's ergin nature."

Ratankle shook his head dubiously. This local ex-

emplification of a Damon and Pythias devotion had grown into neighbourhood legend and it had come to be accepted as indestructible.

"Right now," argued the younger man, "Dawes is burnin' all his daylight over thar on Pig Bristle holpin' Muir ter raise his log house—ther house Muir aims ter take his gal to afore ther snow flies. Dawes, he p'int-blank couldn't spend hisself no more survigrous ef he was a-rearin' a place fer his own infare, with his own gal."

"Yea, an' let Muir beware," warned the old miller grimly. "Dawes ain't seed much of Felicity Cawdon since he used ter pull her pigtails at ther blab school.

"They've done growed up since thet day of time an' Lissy's in ther rise of her bloom. I've done heered tell thet she's flowered into ther comeliest gal on seven creeks, an' mark me full well: When Dawes claps eyes on thet gal he'll aim ter steal her away like he stole away leetle Jase's wits an' like a man robs a bee-gum fer honey."

"I reckon ef ye'd ever seed Muir an' Lissy tergither," commented Ratankle, "ye wouldn't be none fearsome of any man stealin' her away from him."

"Some men kin steal anything they sots ther minds on," was Uncle Jerry's gloomy assertion. "An' women, they're quar thetaway. They're jest p'int-blank stealable."

The conversation was going forward at Uncle Jerry's mill, where the mountain side rose sheer and gorgeously green above a dripping wall of precipice, and where the water tumbled down through spillway and wheel with a murmur like quiet laughter. Through

the dim, meal-powdered interior of the ancient building patterns of sunlight fell inward from the doorway, gilding and brightening the heavy puncheon floor. Now that door was shadowed by a figure, and the laughter of a rich voice sounded there.

"I'll tell ye two reasons why Muir's plumb safe with his gal, Uncle Jerry," announced Dawes Fleetwell in a tone of amused mockery. "First, I never saw the feller yit that could beat Muir's time with any gal he set out ter spark with, an' second, albeit Lissy may be the comeliest gal on seven creeks, I can't use her."

The old miller snorted in incoherent discomfiture, and Dawes went on lightly, with the same satiric undertone:

"I don't aim ter fritter away my whole lifetime here in these God-forsaken hills like a mud turtle in a roadside puddle. I aim ter fare into livelier places then this some day, an' when I picks me out a woman it will be a woman that don't come of no hill-billy foreparents. She's got to be civilized."

The new arrival was a handsome devil of a man, lithely and leanly built of rawhide and gristle. He smiled blandly on the two who had been dissecting his character.

The old miller did not immediately reply, except for a growl which rumbled truculently in his throat. At length he said shortly:

"Hit's evi*dent* ye've done been eavesdrappin' fer quite a spell—an' ye heered jest erbout what's due ter eavesdrappers."

The ironic twinkle in the eyes of the ne'er-do-well goaded the elder to a righteous indignation, and, se-

cure in the immunity of his age, he broke into gusty and loquacious wrath:

"So these hyar mountings of old Kaintuck, they ain't good enough fer ye—ain't they? An' mounting-bred folks, they ain't fitten fer ye ter wed with, ain't they?"

He paused, his ire rising under the sting of a slurred mountain pride, then broke out afresh, sputtering with passion.

"An' seein' as how sich is so, belike hit'll profit ye ter know thet folks roundabout hyar don't ex*pect* nuther Muir Bratchell ner *you* ter tarry hyarabouts over long. Folks norrates thet ye're both too chock-a-block full of ambition-fret ter be helt in one backwoods place."

He paused a moment on that note of specious compliment, then launched his withering climax.

"They 'lows some day ye'll both fare down ter Frankfort town; they figgers thet Muir'll go ter set in ther legislasher, an' thet *you'll* fotch up in ther penitenshery."

Dawes laughed again, with a flash of white teeth in a sun-bronzed face, but as he turned his eyes from the patriarch to the younger man, there lurked in them just a trace of danger under their amused clarity, and Ratankle drew back a bit apprehensively. The rascality of Fleetwell was not that of a timorous rogue. He was abundantly endowed with a dare-devil recklessness which made him brightly dangerous, and the prevalent criticism of his character was discreetly muted by the townsfolk in his presence.

Now there was a deliberately provocative challenge in his voice as Dawes inquired:

"Be ye one of them thet 'lows I'm headed fer ther penitenshery, Ratankle?"

The other young mountaineer made haste with his disclaimer.

"Me? Fer why should I 'low anything like thet, Dawes? Of course any feller is liable ter git inter some trouble, but not you more then anybody else."

"Thet plumb eases my mind," commented Fleetwell satirically. "An' es fer Muir's goin' ter ther legislater, I've done predicted thet fer a long spell. Only I don't look ter see him stop thar. I look ter see him go plumb on ter Congress afore he stops."

Framed in the doorway with a shaft of the sun's radiance falling on him, Dawes had something of the vivid masculine splendour of a cock pheasant. He bore himself with the same easy note of swagger; his blue shirt caught the sun like a scrap of sky, and his eyes were accents of the same blue—only brighter, with an inner kindling. Power slept in him and seemed to ripple in his movements as it ripples in the deceptive indolence of the leopard.

Autumn was painting the hills and spicing the air, and through the colour and the aromatic richness of it young Muir Bratchell was riding his pacing mare to the place over on Bear-cub Run where the countryside was assembling for the excitements of Big Meeting time. To Muir the sights and fragrances of the colour-drenched mountains were as stirring as drumbeat

and trumpet blare. And this was because he did not make his journey alone. After the unamended fashion of pioneer times, Felicity Cawdon rode on a pillion behind him; and often the man twisted sidewise in his saddle, so that he need not wholly relinquish the delight of looking at her. This slim girl, just back from the settlement school, was centre and theme of his life's picture, and Nature's profligate gorgeousness was incidental, as befitted a background.

They were going, like everyone else, to the camp meeting, where several back-country revivalists were to exhort, convert, and baptize, and they were not going under any immediate urge of religion.

Muir was a young farmer who owned a few stony acres, but in his breast glowed a confident fire of ambition. He meant some day to be a lawyer lifting his voice in larger courthouses than the one at Peril Town and venturing into more stirring lists of combat than were offered here at home. The girl, too, had studied under the "fotched-on women" of a settlement school. And in their own circumscribed world the two were accounted as educated above the generality. This gave them a harmless superiority and a viewpoint livened with humour and widened by something of perspective.

They knew that the Big Meeting would not be wholly a matter of spiritual interest but also a pretext, eagerly seized upon, for breaking the life monotony of an isolated and a lonely people. The preachers who would harangue them would be ignorant and superstitious, but they would be endowed with a hypnotic fervour and many penitents would take "a big come

through" to the mourners' bench. There would be hysterical outcries and contortions and at least temporary conversions. From many far-away branch waters would trickle in a strange and motley pilgrimage, desperately hungry for excitement—any excitement—and comedy would liven the solemnity of the days.

Just now these two were not talking of the camp meeting.

"Maybe Dawes is all you say," admitted the girl without conviction, as Muir drew rein at the backbone of a divide and slipped from his saddle, to stand looking up at her. "I'll take your word for most anything, but all I remember of him is that he spent his livelong time tormenting me when I was little. I used to wish I could kill him."

"If you had, Lissy," the man told her, "I'd have been obliged to rear our house single-handed, and I'm not no master hand at corner work. Dawes has plumb spent himself on our workin's, an' albeit it's small, there ain't a better dwellin' house hyarabouts."

Lissy laughed. "Accordin' to what I hear tell, you must be some sort of witch doctor if you can get a day's work outen Dawes Fleetwell. Anyhow, he's your friend and I'll contrive to abide him the best I can."

The mare stood panting from the long and winding ascent of the mountain trail. The man, with his elbows resting on the saddle, could look off over billows of painted ridges to the violet ashiness of a remote horizon, but he elected to let his eyes rest on

the figure of the girl who smiled down on him from her pillion.

"He's always been more than just a friend to me, Dawes has," declared Muir Bratchell earnestly. "If I had need to call on a man to risk his life for me, I wouldn't have to ponder long on who to send for."

"The boy that used to torment and pester me was plumb horrid," said Lissy, "but maybe he's changed." Again her laughter rang softly. "The thing that used to get me pure franzied wasn't so much, after all, come to look back on it. He used to yell at me every recess time:

> " 'If I had a sister Lissy an' she looked like that,
> I'd crack her on the head with a baseball bat.' "

The girl broke off and suddenly her eyes sparkled with merriment.

"Why, bless my soul, Muir, I'm *goin'* to be a sort of sister to him now, I reckon. I wonder if he'll crack me on the head."

Her lover grinned amiably. "I reckon I can answer thet right jedgmatically. He ain't a-goin' to do nothin' of the sort. No man ain't a-goin' to so much as look at you cross-eyed."

They came in the afternoon to the valley of Bear-cub Creek and were in such an assemblage as only those quaint regions can know, where life remains essentially primitive. Men of rudely picturesque speech in jeans and butternut, women in calico and poke bonnets, children in almost nothing at all. They had journeyed in in full family conclave by "jolt

wagon," on muleback, on foot; and here they were, camping without shelter, save those who, like Lissy, were to be guests of native friends.

They were gathered in a great semicircle facing a platform upon which Brother Bud Featherstone already pranced and shouted. Though still in its beginning, a tide of strange hysteria and emotionalism was whipping itself into a rising force under his shouted exhortations. Low groans and smothered shouts of assent sounded through his pauses, and on the platform, on either side of him two other preachers joined in an extemporized litany of spiritual support.

Brother Bud was tall and lean. His beard was ragged and his long-tailed coat flapped about his restless legs; but his eyes burned with fervour and his wind was good.

Muir and Lissy halted on a far edge of the crowd; and presently the young man touched the girl's arm.

"Thar's Dawes now," he told her in a low tone. "I reckon he's a-lookin' fer us."

They turned and walked away into the woods, where the sunset wove long streamers of golden radiance and shadows. Dawes Fleetwell had seen them and awaited them in an amber light which seemed to kindle him into a colourful vitality. The vividness of his eyes was a sort of illumination in his bronzed face as he smiled carelessly, and the lazy brightness of him was challenging. His outstanding and arresting individuality struck the girl, who was prepared to hate him, with a sort of breath-taking surprise; and then as Dawes sauntered forward and nodded he halted and stiffened as though he had abruptly taken a high

voltage through his body. He stood for an instant at gaze, with his lips apart.

He was looking at Lissy, and something had happened to him which had never happened before; something which unsteadied and electrified him; something which was wholly new in his experience of women and life.

Muir Bratchell, blind in his own confidence, missed the human alchemy and significance of that moment. In what he saw of the brief tableau he read only that the two people for whom he cared most had been pleasurably startled by a mutual recognition of each other's human assets, and in that abrupt revaluation he, himself, stood vindicated. Then Dawes moved with his easy indolence—the indolence of sleeping power—and his face became controlled and casual again. He even grinned boyishly, and reverting to his old formula, he said, teasingly:

> "If I had a sister Lissy an' she looked like that,
> I'd crack her on the head with a baseball bat."

Lissy did not want to cry now. She tossed her pretty head and laughed.

"I double-dast you," she retorted, as she had wanted to retort in childhood—and never had.

Brother Bud stood on tiptoe and stretched his bony fists skyward. His utterance was punctuated by those frequent ejaculations which marked his "holy tone."

"Oh, brethren, repent ye, repent ye afore hit's too tardy. Ah—yea, afore hit's too everlastin' tardy, ah!

At corn-drappin' time I besaught men and women ter be baptized in waa-ter, fer thet is God's command. Ah, but they put me off. They put me off, ah, with vain excuses. An' all thet while ther old devil in hell—ah, yea—he was a-tightenin' his clutch on thar souls an' bodaciously a-droggin' 'em tords ther pits of hell; ther hot an' fiery pits of hell."

"The pits of hell. Amen," chorused the seated preachers.

"I besaught 'em ergin an' ergin!" shouted the sweating evangelist, "but still they tarried an' lally-gagged an' helt off fer ther weather an' ther water ter moderate. But, ah, ef they holts off *too* long they're liable ter wake up some soon day an' find theirselves in hell fire. Thar won't be no water thar, but ef thar was, hit wouldn't be too cold. Hit would of plumb moderated but hit would of moderated too late."

In a glade some distance from the rostrum where the colours were richer than the stained glass of any cathedral window, three young people had withdrawn from the crowd.

Dawes, who was eminently endowed with the gift of mimicry, was regaling his audience of two with extravagant travesties on the eloquence of the revivalists. They were travesties full of scoffing wit, of diabolic exaggeration of tone and gesture. He stooped low and leaped high into the air. His eyes blazed and glowered in spurious fervour.

"Oh, brothers an' sisters," he declaimed passionately, "ther hot an' fiery pits of hell air a-yawnin' fer ye—er—ah—yea, jest a-yawnin' an' a-gapin' fer ye! But we aims ter rassle with old Satan fer yore sore-

perilled souls, er—ah—yea, verily! We aims ter tarry hyar an' rassle while ther sperit endures an' our wind holds out."

Quite abruptly he broke off and began speaking in a changed voice.

"Thar's Ratankle Tauber peerin' hither an' yon," he said. "He looks to be in some tormentin' haste. I wonder is he a-s'archin' for us."

"Why should he be?" demanded Muir. But as he spoke the man from his own neighbourhood caught sight of him and shouted:

"Muir, I've got tidin's fer ye. Hit's a right grave matter."

Ratankle hurried forward and the three met him halfway.

"Yore pa is mighty porely, Muir," announced the messenger bluntly. "He's got a pone come up on his side an' right sensibly hit looks he mout drap off stone-dead with his head swimmin'. Yore maw wanted I should fotch word ter ye ter hasten back home."

Felicity waved her sunbonnet from the backbone of the ridge as her lover rode away, and at her side Dawes Fleetwell held his black felt hat high and swept it slowly from side to side.

CHAPTER VI

MUIR's father did not die, but for several nights the son watched by the feather bed where the old man lay with his "misery." It happened that the moon was full. Between vigils Muir went out and gazed at the silver and blue of the mountain world under its night radiance—a radiance which sang softly to his heart.

Lissy was also looking at that moon, he told himself, and thinking of him as he was thinking of her. The same ceiling of star-sprinkled indigo was over them both, as if they were in one splendid room. The whole world was one splendid room; and it was theirs.

At the end of a week he returned to the camp meeting and found its tide of emotionalism mounting high. As he moved through the crowd, Muir did not see Lissy nor Dawes, and he fancied that those men and women who were not too preoccupied with their own salvation eyed him queerly.

After a swift survey through impatient eyes he hurried to the house where Felicity was stopping with a distant relative.

Aunt Mary Lou Messick came to the door as Muir crossed the stile. She stood wordless on her threshold with a tight-lipped grimness of face, which puzzled him and flooded his spirit with foreboding.

"Where's Lissy?" he demanded breathlessly.

The woman wiped her hands on her apron, as though washing them of responsibility. She seemed searching for words.

"What ails ye?" he burst out in tumultuous fright. "Kain't ye talk out? Has Lissy tuck sick? Has some dire thing befell her?"

Aunt Mary Lou shook an austere head.

"She ain't tuck sick," came the slow response, "onlessen hit's sick in her senses. She's done gone away."

"Gone away? Fer God's sake give me ther tidings! I ain't had no word. Whar's she gone to?"

"She jest up and went away with Dawes Fleetwell. They've done been wedded."

"Wedded!" Muir's face went parchment-gray. Pulses began pounding in his temples, jerking crazily in his wrists.

His mouth was so dust dry that his tongue was a sticky, immobile thing half useless for shaping words. His knees were trembling in a palsy of stunned agony.

"Wedded? But—she was—as good as wedded—ter me. We aimed——"

"What you aimed wa'n't what come ter pass," declared the old woman. "An' God knows I hates ter be ther one ter tell ye."

"Go—go on! I've got a bound ter know."

" 'Pears like thet no-count Dawes Fleetwell jest p'int-blank bewitched her. 'Pears like when he looked at her she plumb flew distracted an' went straightway outen her senses."

"But Dawes—he was my friend. Dawes, he was aimin' ter stand up with me——"

"Dawes seed her, an' he craved her—an' he tuck

her," Aunt Mary Lou summarized tersely. " 'Pears like she hadn't no power ter gainsay him. I tells ye both of 'em, they was plumb distracted. Hit come on like a hurricane an' hit jest p'int-blank swep' everything afore hit. We rassled with ther gal in sperit. We forewarned her. We argyfied thet leastways she had a bound ter wait an' talk with *you* fust."

"What—what did she say?"

"She 'lowed hit couldn't make no differ. Hit jest plumb had ter be. Hit hed done been ordained—an' nobody couldn't avail ter change hit."

"An' Dawes, he—he didn't even tarry ter give me my chanst?"

"Dawes he didn't tarry fer nothin'. He knowed what he wanted—an' he got hit."

Muir Bratchell moved stiffly a step to one side and stood steadying himself. The colour did not come back into his pallid face, and under its leather tan it seemed as ghastly as the face of a corpse. But into his dull and stricken eyes crept a fire that grew and intensified; a fire that seemed hot enough to destroy the eyes themselves.

He wheeled after that and started for the stile where his pacing mare stood hitched; and such was the stiff set of his shoulders, the deadly purpose of his stride, breaking into a run, that Aunt Mary Lou called out in affright:

"Whar be ye goin', Muir?"

Pausing an instant on the stile, he whirled fiercely on his heels, and his voice barked scornfully back at her:

"Hev ye got need ter ask me thet? Don't ye know

full well? I'm a-goin' ter kill a rattlesnake—an' I don't aim ter squander no time."

Under his armpit Muir wore a pistol holster, after the custom of the hills. Now he felt for it as he swung into his saddle.

Nothing remained now above the ruins of his shattered world save to settle his score. Not only had he lost everything upon which his life rested, but he had been hatefully and doubly betrayed.

Into the vacuum of his soul, emptied and drained of a friendship at which the countryside had marvelled, rushed hunger for reprisal—and an incarnate hate. That hatred was comprehensive enough to embrace the world in its whole fullness.

If the two exemplars of his ideals in manhood and womanhood were of such spurious stuff as this, the rest of humankind must be even more despicable. He hated the preacher who had sanctified this larcenous infamy by his benefit of clergy. He would ride at full tilt and helter-skelter through the assembled hypocrites who were swaying and ejaculating before this prophet's rostrum. He would shoot the gyrating, spell-binding Brother Featherstone from his pulpit!

But in his inflamed and turgid processes still lurked vestiges of sanity. His grievance was specific, not general. If he began by squandering his vengeance on mere bystanders—hateful to him only because they were human creatures—he would never live to kill the Judas in chief; and that had become life's one imperative mission.

The hundreds of engrossed attendants upon public

worship turned their eyes in amazement from the platform where the gaunt preachers ranted and chorused. Already many in that gathering were in the semi-catalepsy of high-geared emotionalism. They were ripe for hysteria.

They saw a wild-eyed and galloping horseman approaching their fringes; and as they looked, he let out a terrifying and blasphemous yell, discharging his pistol into the air. They could not be sure that this model youth, suddenly converted into a seeming maniac, would not charge them headlong, instead of merely skirting them with his impious interruption.

The seated hundreds came to their feet in all the confusion of panic. They stampeded like crazy cattle. Brother Bud Featherstone halted in mid-tide of perfervid eloquence and stood for a moment as if galvanized, with his arms upstretched and his mouth wide. One of his fellow exhorters disappeared from the raised dais like a diver leaving the springboard.

The next grand jury would doubtless be called on to consider this intolerable outrage of disturbing public worship; but at present no grand jury was at hand, and self-preservation became a matter of individual concern.

But Muir Bratchell, deflected from his senses by the suddenness of his catastrophe, galloped by, cleared the brook which edged the camp-meeting ground and jockeyed his mare with hand and heel in the general direction in which lay the house of Dawes Fleetwell.

Men drifting shamefacedly back from abject flight

felt that they were seeing the beginning of a feud which, even for a feud-ridden land, was likely to establish new precedents.

"I reckon he won't skeercely suffer ther sun ter rise ergin afore he's done either got Dawes or been kilt hisself," predicted Ratankle Tauber.

"I'm confi*dent* of thet," responded a listener soberly. "But Dawes won't aim ter hide out an' he won't give no inch of road. When Muir goes in s'arch of him he'll find him; an' what talk goes forward then, hit'll be gun talk."

Ratankle Tauber wagged his head moodily.

"An' then hell will start a-poppin'," he made prophecy. "Thar's Fleetwells an' Bratchells thicker'n hops all along these hyar creeks, an' they kain't handily keep from bein' drawed inter hit. I mistrusts we're in fer another right grievous war."

Dawes lived in a house of his own, not far from the larger place where his father's family dwelt. Presumably it was to that place of abode that he would take his purloined bride, and await with his careless smile and his impregnable self-confidence whatever might befall.

That house stood across a spine of thickly timbered ridge from the house Muir had been building, and between those places the path had been well trod by the feet of the two young comrades.

It was a long journey from the camp-meeting ground to that home neighbourhood; and as he made it Muir had leisure for his mood to pass through many tense fluctuations. His hot intensity of hate and the inexorable temper of his purpose did not alter, could

not alter; but on its thread he strung varying and contradictory beads of lesser emotion. His mood steadied out of its first intoxicated frenzy into a deadlier quiet; and other thoughts came, like alternating chills and fevers in a mortal malady.

It was only the delirium of first passion which could pretend that such grief as his could be wholly crowded out by any deluge of anger. It was no longer possible to delude himself with the assertion that a woman who could deal so shamefully with him was not worth breaking his heart over. He wanted Felicity now as he had never wanted her before, and he made that confession to himself with the chagrin of scalding mortification, since it spelled an unmanly weakness.

No, Felicity must needs have been bewitched, as Aunt Mary Lou had surmised. Dawes had victimized and stolen her by some dark magic which had blinded her soul; and Dawes needed killing.

Dawes had seen that he need not search the wider and more favoured world for his mate, and he had trampled ruthlessly on every obstacle that stood between himself and his desire. He had not hesitated.

Neither would Muir Bratchell hesitate.

Of course Dawes would expect him to come and would not mistake his motive. Possibly he would follow the course that other men had followed in like case. He might deem life, just now, too sweet a boon to jeopardize in open battle with the one man he acknowledged as his peer. It might be that Dawes would take the simpler course of lying in wait at some convenient point of ambush, and letting his shot come from the laurel. In the face of such an exigency, wis-

dom should have counselled Muir to abandon the open highway and screen his approach through the thickets.

But that thought was abhorrent to the blistering fire in his soul.

His was an injury that could not be appeased and must not be punished by slipping through underbush. His was a mission which must be openly, defiantly carried in a straight and unhesitant thrust to its fulfilment.

"He aimed to stand up with me when I wed with her," groaned the dark-haired young man. "Now he won't stand up with me; he'll lay down afore me—an' he'll lay down fer all time."

Muir had started out a madman in berserk rage. Now he was riding in grim and cold deadliness of purpose. About him flamed the gorgeousness of the frost-painted mountains. On either hand lay tangled rhododendron thickets which the hill people call "laurel hells." Precipices beetled and waters tumbled in a grandeur that a week ago had awakened a song of triumph in his heart. Then Felicity had ridden on the pillion behind him. Now through all the carnival magnificence of scarlet and orange, burgundy and russet, death rode astride his cantle. Autumn had come to mean only a florid and brief foreword to winter and death.

The house of Dawes Fleetwell was as familiar to him as was his own. He could close his eyes and picture the white chinking between the square-hewn logs. He could hear in familiar memory the creak of a broken step on the stile; the whine of wires support-

ing the hanging footbridge; and the murmur of water beneath it. In the untended orchard at one side, the two of them, champion marksmen of a country of straight-shooting men, had often practiced together at the targets with rifle and pistol.

It was drawing near to sunset when Muir reined up and wiped the clammy sweat beads from his forehead. He was near his destination now. A few minutes more and agony could ease itself in action. The air was still and crystal clear. Contours stood brilliantly distinct against a flawless sky, and the shadows were of pure violet. From an overgrown fence row a quail cock sent out his covey call to scattered companions. Peace was upon the countryside in all that was free of man's control.

Muir loosened his pistol in his holster and drew in his slackened reins. He was riding up to solidly built log walls, armed only with a "pistol gun." The man who would be waiting for him behind those walls would wield a repeating "rifle gun."

Yet, somehow, in the spirit which animated and drove him on, none of these inequalities mattered. He disdained them all and felt that his life's fire could not be quenched in death until his mission was accomplished. When that had been done, the sooner he fell the better.

At the hitching post near the suspension bridge the avenger dismounted without haste. He was, by all sensible reasoning, walking straight on to his death, and could not rationally hope for even a shot in return. Yet he went forward with unquestioning confidence.

Inside, Dawes Fleetwell, who had been swinging

his legs from the kitchen table while his bride prepared their supper, lifted his head at some slight sound which only a woodsman would have heard, and slipped unostentatiously down from his seat.

Felicity would not have guessed that this man whose cyclonic wooing had swept her off her feet had entertained a thought since they had come here except for herself. If troubling things had stolen into her own mind the hot tempest of her new love had scorched them out. She had moved in a dream from which the awakening was at hand.

Now Dawes smiled with his careless flash of white teeth and drifted indolently toward the main room.

A loaded rifle rested against the wall by the front door and toward that spot he moved. But he went so unexcitedly that at first Felicity did not catch the significance of his abrupt silence. As he crossed the puncheon floor his handsome face drew dangerously, and by the threshold he lifted the gun.

Dawes took his time, or seemed to be taking his time. One form of courage he had lacked. He had not dared face his friend beforehand and tell him how their lives must change. But now, when the embarrassing need for explanation was past, he did not shrink from the reckoning.

It was the deadened hoof-fall of his enemy's approach on a stretch of sand, still quite distant, that his inordinately keen ears had detected even while he made love to his bride. A wary sentinel inside his brain had been listening for it.

Now, with the rifle in his hands, he waited, well inside the frame of his door and protected from outer

view, although he could, himself, command the approach.

He would not fire until the other man drew close, invading the house which was Dawes's castle. Then, even in a country which admired Muir Bratchell and called Dawes a smart rascal, no jury could be drawn which would hold his act other than one of justifiable self-defense.

But his back had been turned to his wife; and for an instant, as the suspension bridge creaked under a footfall, she stood looking at him, with the gun in his hands. And as she looked her eyes widened to understanding and terror.

Felicity's heart stood still. In the interval between its missed beats, her intuition brought before her the inevitability of what must so soon ensue—the logical consequences of her wild abandon. She must have realized it all in advance had the functioning of her senses not been suspended—submerged in a single concern for her intoxicated fascination. Now she knew.

With a footfall that was soundless, though she thought that man outside as well as the one inside must hear the tumult of her pounding pulses, she slipped across the puncheon floor and stood breathless at her husband's elbow.

She was there when Muir reached the nearer end of the bridge and mounted the stile with the slanting sunlight aglint on the pistol in his right hand.

If he paused there at all it was only for the part of an instant, yet to the woman it seemed a long and horrible tableau. Back of his stiff body the mountains went up purple against the clear amber of the west,

and from somewhere in the quiet a robin sang its ode to the setting sun.

Felicity saw the rifle in her husband's hands move ominously up, and then as noiselessly as a trout in a shaded pool she slipped under his elbow and darted out into the dooryard, keeping her body in line between the two figures and the two guns.

Dawes gave a low growl of surprised chagrin. His impulse was to rush out and draw her in; but he feared that if he showed himself outside the consequent gun play might bring her death. Now, disconcerted by this feminine intervention, he held his fire and waited.

At the sight of her slim figure outside the door the avenger, who had started for the house, halted too, and stood with a pallid face—in silence. It is such trivial miscarriages of one's plans which throw results out of gear. There was nothing remarkable in Felicity's appearance, yet it surprised and disconcerted him. Now he felt suddenly frustrated and powerless.

"I've done wed with him, Muir," said Felicity, and in her voice resolution struggled with a breathless tremor. "Hit's done been settled before God an' man. If ye came in peace ye'd be right welcome here, but ye ain't got no license ter come trespassin' with a pistol gun in yore hand."

CHAPTER VII

THE man who had not seen her since he had last held her in his own arms gazed at her out of stricken eyes and moistened his dry lips with his tongue; but his voice was still the voice of an executioner.

"He may be yore man to wed with," he announced doggedly, "but he's my man to kill. I've done come ter do it. Send him out. Don't suffer him ter hide behind yore petticoats."

The woman stood where she was, a buffer between two men, each greedy to slay.

"Either one of you that shoots at the other," she declared, in a tone which admitted of no misinterpretation, "has got to shoot through me. I ain't no slave woman to be fought over. I chooses my man of my own free will, for my own self. An' I've done chosen."

"You'd done chosen a long time back; and chosen otherwise," declared Muir in a voice out of which, in spite of himself, his power of fury was running like sand between open fingers. "If you had a license to change your mind overnight I had a license to be told."

Felicity shook her head somewhat helplessly; but she stood obdurately straight and slender, and the sight of her tore at the heart of the man who had come to kill.

"Words an' speeches wouldn't have availed for naught, Muir," she said earnestly. "It just came to pass. It was foreordained, I reckon. It had to be."

"Well, now it's got to be paid for."

Muir, still grasping a cocked revolver, gazed at her in a new bewilderment, which he sought to focus into a clarity of undiminished resolve. But as he gazed the sight of her seemed to rob him of his certainty. It blinded him to everything except his hunger for her—a hunger which could not any longer translate itself into an uncomplicated thirst for reprisal. Even above the masculine craving of his passion, he recognized a weakening tenderness for her entirely aside from himself; a growing aversion to the thought of making her suffer to appease his own hurt. He had not supposed that she would even seek to justify her conduct. And now she stood there, bewildered herself, but earnestly unashamed, asserting with an unimpaired self-respect her right as a free agent.

"I know," he said, and his words came slowly, with a tight-throated difficulty—"I know that you ain't no light woman veerin' like a weathervane hither an' yon. I 'lowed I could trust you with my life; an' if you tuck my life an' trompled it under yore feet I know it was because he bewitched ye. I don't fault you ner censure you—no longer; but I aims to hold him accountable. I aims to kill him."

"Then you've got to kill me first," she declared. "I won't be like a bone that two dogs fight over an' the winner gets. You say I changed in the twinklin' of an eye; but it was time enough for me to know—an' to

know beyond all doubt. It was what my life was meant for. We both knew it—Dawes an' me. But no man bewitched me. No man can't bewitch me. I tell ye I'm a free woman. If anybody's to blame it's me; an' if you feel you've got to kill somebody it's plumb got to be me."

The voice of Dawes came from the door. It was not a shaken voice, as was that of Muir, but a steady one and impatient.

"I'm tired of a-stayin' in here, Lissy," he declared. "I'm a-doin' hit because you've done ondertook to have your say, an' thet's yore right. But it won't do no good. You can't always be standin' betwixt me an' Muir; an' sich a grudge as he bears me is long an' lasty." The man paused a moment, then added: "You'd better stand to one side now, Lissy, an' let us shoot it out. Some day hit's bound to come to that an' this time's as good as any."

The girl kept her place carefully between them; but she walked forward closer to Muir Bratchell, where she could move with his movements, the better to shield the two men from each other's gun.

"I don't aim to stand aside, Dawes," she said. "I aims to stand right for myself now an' hereafter. Ye says I can't always stand betwixt ye two, but that's point-blank what I aim to do. If I've got to be just a bone of contention without no say myself then I forewarn you both: If either one of ye falls I die too, an' one of you will be my slayer in the sight of God. From this day on I'm a hostage for both of ye."

The dark-haired young man was trembling in an agony of conflict between wrath and grief; but now

he realized that grief was the stronger, and that grief could find no appeasement in the needless letting of blood. His heart was twisted and wrung dry of its homicidal resolve, and yet the ferocity of his voice was genuine enough when he spoke again—genuine in its application to Dawes, who now stood in plain view leaning against the door frame with a rifle dangling at arm's length.

"I aimed ter give ye everything in life I hed the power to give ye, Lissy," Muir told her in a strained voice. "It shames me ter proffer ye a triflin', no-'count gift—an' that's what Dawes is. Still, if ye craves him —I reckon ye kin have him." He broke off, and his voice leaped fierily into a new beginning. "I loved him an' con*fidenced* him an' he betrayed me. The strongest feelin' I've got left is a hunger an' thirst to punish him in accordance with his deserts. The strongest feelin' I've got save one other—an' that one other is my loath to make ye suffer."

He moved forward and, with an impulsive toss, reversed the pistol in his hand, holding it out to her in a gesture of disarmament.

"Take this pistol gun afore I changes my mind ergin," he commanded, with a choke in his throat. "I aims ter go on away from hyar now—an' I don't never aim ter dark this door from now on. An' ef Dawes wants ter shoot a shot at me while I goes, hit'll be a kinderly charity ter me."

"If Dawes shoots at you now, or ever," she declared in a voice intended for both men, as she accepted the weapon from his hand, "or if you shoot

at Dawes—ever—I'll kill myself with this pistol gun. An' God knows I means that."

He nodded and slowly crossed the stile. Slowly he mounted his horse; and, as he rode away, his shoulders sagged forward.

"I kaint no wise fathom hit," Uncle Jerry Skrem had been accustomed to assert with the constancy of a refrain, as the months had lengthened into years and still Muir Bratchell's avenging wrath had failed to break over the head of his betrayer. "Hit'll come yit. Hit's got a bound ter come. Some folks kin bide thar time, that's all. Ther hate ain't nowise withered up in Muir's heart. Thar's some mystery mixed up with hit all, an' mysteries they comes out an' manifests theirselves some day."

As for Muir himself he held his counsel. He had been admitted to the bar now, and as he conscientiously rode the circuit from county seat to county seat, his face was gaunt and his lips tight. The eyes, once so quick to liven into smiling response, looked out narrowed and grim on the world, and if men marvelled at his unnatural forbearance, at least they refrained from questioning him upon it. It was felt that fires were banked in this man's heart which it was not the part of wisdom to invite into explosion.

Men also noted that the young hillsman no longer expressed himself in the crude phrases, nor bore himself with the careless uncouthness, of the back country. As befitted a man of professional contacts, even though his clients be few, he now observed the

smoother decorum of the court room, and strange to say he had not, in a land dedicated to a feudal and unforgiving spirit, lost caste by his failure to strike down the enemy whom that code held his man to kill.

Muir had not even seen the man-child who had been born to the woman his enemy had stolen from him. He rode far and wide over the broken levels, but that barrier of timbered hill between Bear Wallow and Pig Bristle which he had once crossed so often stood as self-forbidden to his life as some remote Himalayan backbone.

One afternoon as Dawes Fleetwell lounged at the front door of his own house, lazily colourful like a sunning leopard, a man and a woman came riding along the road beyond the suspension bridge, and one glance served to tell that both were "furriners." The woman did not sit a carpet-covered sidesaddle, but rode astride in breeches, and the man wore travel-stained whipcords and pigskin puttees.

Dawes turned his head and spoke through the door to Lissy:

"Thar comes two strangers," he commented idly. "They're furriners an' one of em's a woman ridin' a-straddle in pants with puffed sleeves."

At the same moment the woman on horseback saw him, and her travel-wearied eyes lighted for an instant in instinctive appreciation:

"Well, for the love of God!" she exclaimed to her companion, "look at the big bird in the door. Some backwoods Jack Barrymore, what? Wouldn't he knock your eye out?"

"Trust you," growled the horseman, with the tes-

tiness of aching fatigue, "to lamp the ladies' man—Broadway or backwoods." Then he added in a less surly tone: "But you're right, at that. He fills the eye; and you can see he hates himself—like a tightwad hates his money."

The sun was setting and the cove where the log cabin sent up its plume of chimney smoke was flooded with a clear lemon bath of lingering light.

As the two lowlanders looked across the paling fence which separated the small yard from the road and the lazily sliding waters of the creek they caught the subtle impression of two personalities stamped on the surroundings. The rusting rubble of farm gear lying about in disorder spoke of a self-complacent man's distaste for work. The straight row of hollyhocks along the palings and the small "blossom gyarden" in its brave bloom of weedless order must declare the spirit of the woman they had not yet seen.

As they crossed the suspension bridge she appeared in the door with a shy child clinging to her skirts; and the guests had a swift impression of two human flowers—one in full blossom and one a bud.

Dawes himself, moving with the languid grace of sleeping power, offered the hospitality of his roof, and his wife seconded his invitation in a voice and manner of quiet dignity.

"My name is Montgomery—Worth Montgomery," announced the lowlander with a trained precision of enunciation and inflection. "This lady," he added, "is Miss Hope Fayton. We are artists—artists of some reputation on the big time, but that is naturally an interest remote from this country."

Dawes nodded slowly and spoke with a drawling unconcern.

"We don't see a lavish of art hereabouts. It's a God-forgotten sort of land we dwells in and yet there's scenery a-plenty that might warrant bein' set down in paint."

Miss Fayton laughed, and her voice was not unpleasant, though, like that of her companion, it was flawed by affectation.

"We aren't that kind of artists," she volunteered. "We don't paint anything but our faces. We do our stuff in vaudeville; and, if I do say it myself, we're headliners."

"We are doing a dramatic sketch next season," Mr. Montgomery enlightened his rustic hosts, "which is to be placed against a Kentucky mountain background. It will be booked for a full forty weeks —over the big time, of course. We want it to have true authenticity, so we are travelling among you, studying the life, the drama, the idiom of your people."

He paused impressively; and a faint smile stirred in the eyes of the silent man at the door. One of these two men was, by his own confession, an artist of some celebrity; the other was presumably a semi-illiterate. Yet in each stirred the spirit of the exhibitionist; the calculated pose of the show-off.

"If it's backwoods ways an' phrases ye seek to study, I reckon we kin l'arn ye a lavish," the householder gave assurance with a self-contained ease. "Right now ye seems kinderly tuckered out. Come in an' take the night with us. We're both right proud

ter enjoy ye." Dawes let a smile flash across his colourful face and somehow he conveyed the impression that he employed dialect only for its humorous effect, and that he could, if he chose, use more urbane English.

When the supper was ended and the refreshed travellers sat by the door a moon rode up over the steep and purpled ramparts of the Kentucky ridges and made of the cloistered stillness a mystery of platinum light and colourful dark. That stillness stole into the beings of the lowland pair, accustomed to noisier environments; and when the frogs awoke to a piping chorus and a whippoorwill called, their voices seemed only to accentuate the pervasive silence.

As if by accident, yet by an accustomed accident, the woman of the vaudeville stage and the man whom his neighbours called a smart rascal placed their chairs where the moonlight fell on their faces, and one might have fancied that their poses and movements were calculated.

Felicity remained in the shadow and spoke rarely. The worldly-wise talk of these visitors was delighting Dawes like the taste of a newly discovered wine —and it was disquieting to his wife in the same measure. In her shadowy retreat no one saw the trouble that smouldered in her dark eyes, as she glanced from her husband to the woman who talked vivaciously of footlights and audiences and who smoked cigarettes between crimson lips. No one remarked the catch in Felicity's breath as she pondered on this alarming quality in Dawes which made the eyes of

women follow him, lighting greedily as they lingered.

As Dawes swung into anecdote his wife realized that he was shaping his speeches calculatedly for the benefit of his guests, and that he was entirely willing to paint his own people with the broad strokes of satire even at the cost of making them appear ludicrous and melodramatic. She flushed with the discovery that he was exploiting his kith and kin in order to shine as a raconteur and a sophisticate before his new audience, while their laughter attested his success.

At length Dawes went inside and came out with an ancient "dulcimore." He made it speak in quaint music under his fingers; and as his rich voice swung into song the pair from the theatre bent forward and Montgomery's pipe died. This man of the backwoods was giving them the old "song ballets" of which they had heard and which they knew in a form of imitation that suddenly became wholly spurious. Yet, still imbued with his spirit of caricature, the "smart rascal" was emphasizing the nasal falsetto with which hillsmen can turn the merriest tune into dismal lugubriousness. He was burlesquing the sturdy folklore—yet burlesquing it so artfully that it seemed authentic. Felicity knew better.

"Great!" exclaimed Miss Fayton excitedly. "If you gave 'em that stuff across the foots, Mr. Fleetwell, you'd knock 'em off their seats. You'd be a panic."

Fleetwell laughed deprecatingly.

"I'd thought of that sometimes," he replied easily, "but I ain't foot-loose."

"I reckon ye've all done heered 'bout Dawes Fleetwell, ain't ye?" inquired Uncle Jerry Skrem some months later of the handful of gossiping neighbours who loitered at his mill. "Not thet hit amazes me none. I've done p'intedly been expectin' some sich-like thing ter transpire all along."

"What's Dawes been up ter now?" inquired someone, and Uncle Jerry wagged his head importantly.

"Ye all knows how he tuck up with a couple of quare folks thet come a-farin' through hyar—circus people or somethin' ter thet amount. Ther woman was all bedizzened an' bedecked with paint an' powder like some Jezebel outen ther Bible-book, an' the man-person, he wa'n't no great shakes better."

The miller nodded and searched his pockets for crumbs of chewing tobacco.

"Waal, they fared on—an' now 'pears like Dawes he's done follered atter 'em ther same ez a feist dog follers a feller with a bone."

"I reckon ther woman, she war the bone, wa'n't she?"

"Belike she war. But how erbout Dawes's own woman? Looks like she's done been lef' with ther bag ter hold—her an' a brat ter feed offen a farm thet's too pore ter raise a cuss-fight on."

"I wouldn't counsel no man ter go gallivantin' over thar, seekin' ter fault Dawes fer what he done," commented Ratankle Tauber. "I'd done a'ready heered this tale an' I brogued by thar an' proffered ter speak a kind word, but she up an' plumb spit at me like a cat in a bar'l. Hit war right gay luck thet I got me away from thar with a whole skin."

"What fer did she fly out at ye when ye only sought in a manner o' speakin' ter be charitable?" inquired Uncle Jerry, and Ratankle shook his head.

"Hit plumb baffled me but she wouldn't suffer me ter disgust Dawes. Her eyes glittered at me like anvil sparks an' she clenched her fists. Seemed like she war erbout ter bust out an' cry an' yit she talked bold enough. She said:

" 'Who says he's gone away an' lef' me? Who says hit save a passell of old he-women gossipin' amongst theirselves for lack of aught better ter do? Can't a man go to some other place ter get things ready fer his family ter foller him? Can't a body aim ter better hisself?' Them thar was her own words—or words ter thet amount. So I gives up aimin' ter comfit her an' come away."

"Did she norrate ter ye how he aimed ter better hisself, or whar he'd done gone ter do hit at?"

"She'd 'lowed he'd done fared plumb ter New York an' aimed ter act on ther stage. Ter sing song ballets an' ther like. She jedgmatically pronounced he aimed ter send fer her an' ther boy afore long."

"Yeah, eygad," sneered Uncle Jerry. "I reckon he'll send fer her ther fust time ther creek freezes tight in dawg days—an' Godamighty Hisself couldn't skeercely freeze no creek in dawg days."

As the summer progressed and tarnished the hillsides with its blistering drought men and women smiled and stopped to look at the dwindling trickle of the creek.

"I don't note no ice formin' on ther water," they

would comment with the grin that connotes a neighbourhood jest, "an' I don't note thet Lissy's gone away yit."

When the splendour of the autumn died and the hills were bleak barriers of chocolate streaked with snow, Uncle Jerry's prophecy still held good; but on a day when the lock of the ice was breaking to release the "spring tide" along the waterways the neighbourhood awoke to amazement.

Hurrying to reach the railhead at Peril Town before the roads should become impassable from washouts and flooded fords, Felicity started on her journey. She rode a sidesaddle with the small boy clinging to her slicker in the rain. Felicity had been graciously summond to her lord and master, and her destination was New York.

"Now," said the verdict of the community with categorical assurance, "they'll all starve amongst strangers."

CHAPTER VIII

INSPECTOR CRANDALL sat behind his desk at headquarters with his chair tilted back and across from him sat Lew Codington, attorney at law. Between these two men was an air which was scarcely one of intimacy yet which bespoke something of time-tested understanding. That attitude was expressed in the words of the detective head as he made thoughtful comment.

"You and I have known each other pretty well, Codington. You've got a large and lucrative practice and a good part of it has been in the criminal courts."

"My practice is general," the lawyer corrected him. "It's true that a fair part of that practice has been in the criminal divisions, but I'm not limited to that."

The inspector went on unimpressed by the implied rebuke.

"Be yourself, Lew," he suggested amiably. "You know damn well that if you gave up defending men charged with crime your income tax wouldn't run into the higher brackets—and I know it, too."

"Have it your own way," conceded Mr. Codington blandly, "but it occurs to me that this line of conversation is irrelevant to our present business together."

"Perhaps, but in my own way I'm driving at something. I speak of those activities of yours that have thrown the two of us into most frequent contact—and those activities have been many. Generally we've been on the opposite sides of the docket. I've been with the prosecution and you with the defense. You've scored on me often enough—and sometimes, as now, we've found ourselves in the position of allies. The point is that we ought to understand each other well enough for plain talk."

"Make it as plain as you like."

"Very well. There's a thing that has rather puzzled me, and I've got to speak of it."

"And what is that?"

"When Archibald was dying he called for two men: his own doctor and his own lawyer."

"I don't quite see why that strikes you as strange. It seems to me both a natural and a prudent impulse."

"Absolutely. But what puzzled me a bit is—how did you happen to be his lawyer?"

"That is a question which might conceivably give offense if I were an irritable man. However, I'm not. As you say, we know each other fairly well, and a police official has a more than poetical license. You ask me why I was Archibald's attorney. I ask you: Why am I the lawyer of my—shall I say—several other clients?"

"Because for the purposes of most of them you have few equals at the bar."

"But as to Archibald you conceive there is a difference?"

Crandall nodded.

"Yes, unless Archibald differs from the picture given to the public. He is portrayed as a man of affairs, a rich man operating in real estate, stock investments, in short, in varied but always legitimate business."

"And quite a correct picture, too. How does that make me a misfit in the picture?"

"The man who needs a noted criminal lawyer in his business affairs is usually the man whose business is at some point questionable."

Mr. Codington leaned forward, and his expression became one of mild annoyance.

"This is growing monotonous, Chief," he objected. "I have told you that my practice is general. Your implication almost gives me the lie."

"You have already granted me a certain license," Crandall reminded him amiably. "This is a case in which we are both working to the same ends. Presumably we have one common purpose and that is to find and punish this man's murderers."

"If either of us has failed in that effort," asserted Mr. Codington, "it has not been I."

"No. I didn't intend my remarks as an accusation. Also I realize that as an attorney you are the judge of what and what not to emphasize in your client's affairs—or the affairs of his estate, but——"

"But what?"

"But you seem to have been closer to him than anyone else, and since his death we've been up against a strange situation."

"And that is?"

"Why a man rated as so well known develops after

death into a figure of such mystery. On the street thousands recognized him at sight. At theatrical openings he was pointed out. His business calibre was conceded. Now he dies and no near relatives are found. No one seems to know much more than those casual passersby on the sidewalks who knew his face when they saw it."

"He was what you might call a recluse who loved the limelight," responded Mr. Codington thoughtfully. "Yes, he was an anomaly; there's no doubt of that."

"He was called a capitalist," went on the inspector. "Yet what was his business? Oh, I know he traded in this and that. I know he had an office splendidly fitted and an office staff, but on his door was only a name—no such words as 'Broker' or 'Real Estate' or anything else. It comes down to this. After all, wasn't he simply a bold and successful gambler?"

"That strikes me as a quibble in terms. If you call men who speculate in this and that, men who operate as free lances of finance, gamblers, then he would fall within your definition," answered the dead man's lawyer. "If you accept the more ordinary uses of the word, he was a capitalist. Where does all this lead us?"

"It leads us to a determination of where to hunt for a motive and a murderer," announced Crandall bluntly. "It leads us to an inference as to whether he was killed for some unaccountable reason or because he was in fact a sort of glorified underworld character—with underworld alliances and enmities."

Codington frowned.

"In other words, you intimate that he was a crook, and so he needed a legal adviser who could steer him between legal shoals."

The inspector did not alter his calm expression.

"Precisely, and whatever he was in life," he answered, "he's dead now. I take it that our interest becomes the same; namely, to punish his killers. I'm going to get some questions off my chest. You can answer them or not as you see fit. Can you assure me that Archibald's business involved him in no association with criminal partners, partners who might have suddenly turned into deadly enemies?"

The lawyer shook his head.

"I have said he was a sort of notoriety-seeking recluse," he answered soberly. "I cannot assure you that he told me everything, or that I knew all his business. I can, however, tell you categorically that if he had underworld partners or underworld enemies I knew nothing of them, and I believed myself to be in his confidence."

"You were present when his strong boxes were opened. With the administrators you have been through his papers and effects," persisted the inspector. "Doesn't it strike you as surprising that a man whose assets run above a million, and who had no immediate family, should have died intestate? Is it within reason that such a man should have had no care as to what became of his estate?"

Codington nodded.

"I have speculated on that feature. I drew several wills for him from time to time," he explained. "Each of them he reconsidered and finally destroyed. Usu-

ally a man does not tear up one will until he has replaced it with another. In that, as in other respects, he was eccentric. He appeared to regard death as a thing too remote to warrant consideration. Now the money will go to distant relatives, all of whom were remote from his life."

"Would it be proper to ask you what provisions some of the earlier wills contained?"

"I don't see why not. Such information might be valuable to you. It might tend to give you an idea of persons who may have thought they would benefit by his death—but in this case it was not so. The earlier wills planned rather magnificent monuments in the form of charities which should keep his name alive and cause it to remain on the popular tongue after his death."

"That seems commendable enough."

The lawyer smiled.

"It was not benevolence but vanity," he asserted. "He said to me several times, 'I don't give a damn about these things, but at least men won't forget me quite so soon.' I almost hoped he had executed a will that I didn't know about. In all the others he had remembered me rather handsomely. Now, of course, that's out."

"Did he ever speak of making any provision for Millicent Jasper? Until I talked with her I rather suspected that she might produce something of the sort."

The attorney laughed grimly.

"He had no idea of leaving her money. He was going to put her on Broadway, that was all. As a matter

of fact, he'd seen through her. He was easing himself gradually out of that affair."

"Did she suspect that?"

"No. She thought she had him hooked, netted, and creeled. He meant to have her think that until his own good time."

Crandall grinned as he asked point-blank:

"Was that discreet course taken on your excellent advice?"

Mr. Codington's face did not change.

"I should certainly not have advised against it," he responded. "So long as this woman felt sure of him she was less likely to seek to inveigle him into signing on the dotted line. She was quite capable of that, you know and he had his moments of susceptible weakness."

"Wasn't it amazing, too," inquired the detective, "that he should have given so many large checks drawn only to 'Cash' or 'Bearer'? The examination of his accounts shows that some of these ran into big money."

"A habit which I discouraged," sighed the lawyer, "but one which he would never discuss with me."

"Do you regard it as possible," demanded Crandall, "that besides the Archibald you knew and advised there was really another man, doing business under another name, keeping records somewhere in a strong box under an alias?"

"Of course you realize that is a question which, as a lawyer, I might refuse to answer," Codington replied. "It is a question I should have to refuse to answer as one of privileged communication if that an-

swer were 'Yes.' As it happens, the answer is that I have no such knowledge or belief, and therefore I am free to respond."

Crandall reached into his side pocket for his pipe. and grinned ruefully.

"Well," he said, "we seem to have run into a blind alley. For a time the newspapers were indulgent to us. Now they are opening fire; they are clamouring for a reorganization of the police department. They are besieging the mayor until his tongue is hanging out. Police are presumed to get results. If they don't they are either incompetents or crooks—or both. I sleep about four hours a night, yet I see cartoons of myself as being never awake—and if I were outside looking in I'd think about the same thing as the men who draw those pictures."

Motorcycle Policeman Heeny was speeding along Pelham Parkway on his noisy machine in pursuit of a car which his own speedometer told him was doing a sprint subversive of all lawful speed regulations.

Officer Heeny set a jaw which Nature had already set rather firmly, and fed the juice to the motor. So intent was he on the matter in hand, and so fixed were his eyes on the road ahead of him, that it was only a sidewise glance which made him conscious of a man who turned, reeling, off of the sidewalk and seemed to go with a rambling zigzag gait into a patch of wooded ground at its left.

The investigating of drunks was less in his province than the issuing of tickets to such hurried motorists as the one in front of him, and the man he had

glimpsed bore all the earmarks of a drunk, hardly able to travel on his own power.

But after the pursuit had ended and a lad whose criminality was that of reckless and superabundant youth had received his summons, the patrolman thought again of the staggering creature who had been stumbling and weaving along behind him.

As he returned he rode slowly, and when he reached the spot where he had seen the pedestrian he began scanning the lightly timbered patch of woods which stretched away from the road, with here and there a jutting shoulder of granite outcropping from the earth.

"It's not far he's gone," reflected Officer Heeny. "He wasn't making much speed when I seen him. Like as not he's sat down behind a rock to ease the head on him. Well, let him go. It's meself has other business to think about."

But as he was about to ride on, his eye caught a patch of dark in the woods and on closer scrutiny this patch developed into a human figure lying prostrate. So, parking his machine, Heeny went in to have a look. This bird might need attention.

He did need attention, though it did not at first develop that this need arose from any other cause than that to which the officer had attributed it.

The figure was that of a well-dressed young man in his twenties with a face that was weak but not unlikable and with hair of a pale blond.

The officer stood for a moment looking down before he stooped, and as he did so he noted that the

young man's head was gashed and blackly bruised as though from a bludgeoning.

"Looks like he beaned himself on that piece of rock when he fell," observed the officer; then as he knelt down and thrust his arm under the shoulder of the unconscious figure his eyes clouded.

"Some of that blood on his face is old blood," he made observation. "It don't come from no clout that he got just now. Well, that's for the ambulance lads to figure," and he left his charge lying on the grass long enough to turn in a call.

As he waited for a response he took out his notebook and pencil and occupied himself with a closer investigation, and the while this proceeded his interest grew.

"Somebody's crowned this lad with a piece of pipe or a blackjack," he made speculative announcement to himself. "An' yet they left his watch and twenty dollars in his kick. What th' hell! What's this?" His exclamation came after going more thoroughly through the pockets of the supposed drunk.

The officer rose to his full height and scratched his head. He had made mystifying discoveries.

"Somebody just about soaked him and throwed him out of a car," he decided. "Yes, and they cut the labels off his clothes, too. They didn't leave no letters nor nothin' else to identify him by—an' yet they never touched his coin. He's been taken for a ride, this fella has."

There was a clanging of bells and a white-jacketed ambulance interne dropped off the tail step of the

car and fell busily to work. The unconscious man was hoisted into the hospital wagon, which backed, turned, broke into a strident clamour of gong noise, and dashed away.

Crandall was sitting in his office when a police clerk came in with a memorandum slip in his hand.

"They've got a man over at Bellevue," he said, "that they want you to come over and have a look at."

"What's the idea?" demanded the inspector. "Why do they need me?"

"Unidentified man picked up on Pelham Parkway," reported the messenger succinctly. "Looks like he might have been thrown out of a car. . . . Head smashed. . . . Money intact, but all identifying marks removed from pockets and clothing. Still unconscious."

"Yes." The inspector spoke impatiently, for so far this savoured only of daily routine. "But why do they send for me?"

The police clerk leaned forward and spoke with a sense of dramatic consequence.

"There was a false pocket inside his coat sleeve, Skipper, and they found an uncashed check there for fifty grand. The check was signed Clem W. Archibald."

Crandall never seemed hurried, he never betrayed surprise, but now, as he thrust his blunt pipe back into his coat pocket and rose, his eyes narrowed and kindled.

"I guess I'd better go over there," he said quietly.

CHAPTER IX

DOWN to the door of the actors' boarding house in West Forty-fourth Street Felicity Fleetwell slipped from her hall bedroom on the fourth floor. She was nourishing the faint hope that on the funereal old marble-top hatrack there might be a letter for her from someone at home.

There was usually someone there pawing over the scattered mail and going away crestfallen—men in shiny but once pretentious clothes, and women whose off-stage make-up failed to disguise the overblown quality of a bloom gone by. They were stage folk, but they usually seemed "at liberty," and disappointed. Dawes, too, had been for some time "at liberty," but each day he brushed aside his disappointment as he brushed off his street clothes, set his shoulders, and started out jauntily swinging his walking stick to make his round of the agents' offices.

A student of human types seeing the Dawes Fleetwell of this day and place would have marvelled at his metamorphosis. He was a denial of all those theories which hold that the leopard cannot change its spots nor a man escape his heredity. Dawes was endowed with a mercurial adaptability and an astounding quick-mindedness which served him in the brevity of weeks as experience serves other men through the tediousness of years.

He had come without intermediate stages from the most isolated hermitage of the American scene into the most complicated vortex of the world's city life, and there a brief taste of immediate and facile success had augmented his natural conceit and swollen his vanity. He did not know or would not admit that his first vaudeville venture had been a surprising hit because he was burlesquing, with native understanding, the idiosyncrasies of his native blood, and doing it with the shrewdly biting irony of a clever apostate. He did not realize that when he attempted any other characterization he sank beneath the dull level of mediocrity. The patter of the theatre and the street fell trippingly from his smiling lips. Dressed in what Broadway regarded as the mode, he made an arresting and dapper figure, even when the elbows of his coat had begun to shine and the cuffs of his trousers to fray.

Felicity's own disappointment was a different thing. It was the ache and blight of nostalgia; the yearning of an exile in an environment to which time had not reconciled her. It was hunger and thirst for an upland country where the shadows of tall ranges lengthened over the sunshine of quiet valleys—the suffering of nerves assailed by the strident crashing of alien noises.

A somewhat frowzy woman in a flowered kimono nodded her bleached head in casual recognition when Felicity reached the ground floor.

"Greetings, dearie. Are you still looking for the letter that never comes? Same here—only God knows I need mine. No letter—no job. No job—no eats."

Isabel Cherry spoke loudly, in a voice which, despite its hardness, was both friendly and philosophic; and a kindly accusation crept into it as she shrewdly eyed this other woman, so obviously out of place here.

"Yes—and you've been crying again. Say, dearie, you don't belong here, do you? You're from the country and you don't seem to get town-broke."

Felicity stiffened a little. She felt thrown on the defensive when another put into blunt words the content of her own thought.

"Everybody gets homesick sometimes, I guess," she said lamely. "The town is wonderful, of course, and my husband loves it."

"Yes, he eats it up, doesn't he?" Miss Cherry spoke drily and her eyes were those of disillusionment. Then she slipped an arm around the slender waist of her younger companion and spoke commandingly.

"Come on up to my room and tell it all to mother. You're brooding over something and what you need is a good cry."

Felicity sought ineffectually to escape, and in the end found herself ensconced in a rocking chair from which she had a view of an untidy bedroom with stockings drying on a line across the single window.

"I've noticed," announced the unemployed actress, "that down in the basement banquet hall, where your man is the life of the party, you have about as much to say as a paralytic in a pantomime. That's not so good, girlie. New York's a bum burg to be lonesome in."

"They talk about things I'm not up on," confessed Lissy uneasily, "so all I can do is just listen."

"They talk about themselves," declared Miss Cherry grimly; "but you owe it to yourself to horn in more. Thinking parts don't often get you a hand."

Felicity's response was hardly candid, but she felt that loyalty to Dawes and his choice of abodes required it.

"I'm sure the people are all right here," she said staunchly enough. "They're all artists and Dawes finds them congenial. But you see, I'm not an artist myself."

"Artists!" Miss Cherry sniffed and broke into a disdainful laugh. "Yes, I know that line. None better. Sir Richard Mansfield might be just an actor; but the old bird across the hall there with the trained-flea act, he's an artist and he doesn't want you to forget it. Where did you come from, dearie, before you struck this polluted paradise?"

"Kentucky," answered Felicity; and as Isabel nodded, she amended:

"I came from the mountains. It's right different there from lowland places."

"I'll say it's right different," declared Miss Cherry with an unrestrained burst of laughter. "I had a part in one of those mountain-feud melodramas once. I had to play it barefoot and I got splinters in my feet off of every stage from Stamford, Connecticut, to Wilmington, Delaware. God was good and the show flopped before I was crippled for life." She paused a moment and then went on reminiscently. "And the hick dialect! I had to have my voice dry-cleaned

when I got through. Yes, the mountains are different from New York."

Felicity coloured to the roots of her dark hair, and Isabel, recognizing the pain on the flushed face, hastened to make amends.

"Dearie," she declared penitently, "I wasn't criticizing you—or your people, either. When I said you weren't town-broke I only meant you were different. You have the sense to be yourself among a bunch of strutting hams and it makes you stand out like a sore thumb. No, I don't mean a sore thumb, either—it's more like a mockingbird in a cage of parrots." After a moment's reflection Miss Cherry added thoughtfully: "You *are* a long way from home, aren't you? How did a typical Broadwayite like your husband ever have the sense to fall for you?"

"My husband," Lissy told her quietly, "came from the same place I did."

"But he's got all the trade-marks of the big burg," the older woman declared incredulously. "You see him swinging his stick in Times Square and you'd say he was hatched out of a hard-boiled egg in the subway. At that, though, I needn't have been so surprised; the typical New Yorker always comes from Podunk and points west."

"He's splendid on the stage," testified Dawes's wife. "When he had his act singing mountain ballads he got great notices. I'd love to show you some of them."

"Don't trouble," said Miss Cherry hastily. "I'll take your word for it. There's one thing I'm glad of, dearie. You aren't making an odious 'artist' of your

boy. He's a nice kid and it's just as well to keep him that way. God preserve us from the average stage child!"

Lissy rose from her chair.

"I must be getting to my room; it's time for him to come home from school," she said; then suddenly a flash of the old-time merriment brightened her eyes and she spoke with a deliberate assumption of the drawling mountain vernacular, of which, a little while ago, she had been so painfully ashamed.

"I'm right beholden ter ye, ma'am," she said. "Hit p'int-blank frisks a person's sperits ter hev speech with a friendly body."

Miss Cherry laughed with resounding sincerity.

"You landed a haymaker on me there, dearie," she cried. "If that's the way you talk it in your hills it's no wonder our show flopped, the way we did it. We were as much like it as a pig squealing under a fence is like a bird singing in a lilac bush."

But as Lissy reached the door Miss Cherry halted her again; and this time her words came with impulsive candour.

"Oh, by the way, dearie," she suggested, "take a tip from an old trouper. Smile like that oftener. It suits your style. You're miscast as a Sister Dolorosa. That man of yours has a way with the women. Don't fade out before your time."

The anxiety crept back to Felicity's eyes. Again she had been startled to hear from other lips a thought which was never far from her own consciousness. More than the grind and roar of the elevated and the hurrying of milling crowds it disquieted her heart.

"You've got him now; and you've got youth," went on the cheerful cynic, speaking out of her extensive if seamy experience. "I guess you want to keep him. You won him because back home you were a stand-out in looks and pep. You won't hold him by showing that you're licked. Your husband came out of the tall timbers into the fastest-stepping town in the world. Did it cast him down? Did it give him the heeby-jeebies? It did not. But maybe it turned his good-looking head. Don't seem droopy and downhearted, dearie, or he'll get to slipping. That's men. Keep him up on his toes. Step out and start him guessing. It's no use to advise you to smile a little at somebody else; you wouldn't do it. But at least smile at him, or, better yet, laugh at him. And when he pulls this hoary line about his art let him suspect that *you* know it's the bunk—the hooey, the banana oil."

In the none-too-cheery cubicle in which she spent much of her time—a cubicle whose single window looked out over back walls and chimney pots—Felicity was darning stockings and doing some deep thinking.

She heard a step which she recognized on the dusty stairs—the step of her husband—and a moment later Dawes himself threw open the door and entered the room. For once he forgot to strike a pose on the threshold and Felicity sought to school out of her voice a tremor of anxiety.

"Did anything turn up, Dawes?"

The man shook his head, and his vividly handsome eyes wore a sullenly smouldering expression as he tossed his walking stick onto the bed and began drawing off a pair of gloves that were none too clean.

But if his finery was tarnished, it was still the finery of Broadway; and if discouragement gnawed at his vitals, it gnawed under a dapper veneer of Spartan concealment.

"There's bound to be a change of luck before long," he announced doggedly. "I've got the stuff and they can't hold me down. If this man Archibald had lived I'd be sitting pretty right now."

"But Dawes," she ventured to suggest, "those people across the hall—they've just booked their act. I heard them say so at breakfast."

"Those bums?" The scorn of the man's voice was blistering. "They'd snatch at anything that was thrown at them. They're four-a-day hams. I have my reputation. The agents wouldn't offer me that sort of stuff. They'd know better."

"But anything is better than nothing, Dawes. It would pay the rent."

"It would be surrender," he assured her. "I have a position to sustain. I'd as soon go back——"

Felicity took an eager step forward. Her voice was like a prayer.

"Go back, Dawes? Back to the mountains? I'd rather do that——"

"Yes, I suppose you would," he observed moodily. "You'd rather go back to dry-rot than stick fast and fight it out. You'd rather have me slink off with my tail between my legs than see me stand and fight where I belong—developing my art for my public. Here, where you're among artists——"

She gasped at the word as he broke off, but said

nothing; and the man went on again, veering to memories in which lay greater comfort for his vanity.

"Take that act I worked up with the six-guns; those revolver stunts of quick drawing and shooting—when they billed me as 'The Shooting Star.' Didn't Fred Stone come to the theatre especially to see that, and didn't he come back to my dressing room?"

He smiled with self-appreciation.

"Didn't Captain Foley of the Police Training School invite me to come out to their picnic and give a demonstration to his boys? Praise from those men is praise indeed—and they had to hand it to me." He paused and the momentary depression vanished from his face as he sampled again the relish of his few minor and scattered triumphs. His smile flashed brilliantly.

"I'll be offered something I can afford to consider before long," he assured her airily. "When the booking agencies come to their senses they'll be eating out of the hands of the men that can pull business to the box office. Then they'll lay off the duds." His eyes were glowing with prophetic triumph, but they sobered as he added somewhat less assuredly: "Meantime, though, we've got to tide over—just until the big chance comes—until I get a break."

He broke off, then added with a trifle less assurance,

"The brat that had the kid part in Shaver's play is being put out next week. They've got to fill his place quick. If Cawdon inherits any of his daddy's stuff he ought to eat that kid part up. We'd better take him up there to-morrow and——"

"Cawdon!" The woman let her child's name escape from her lips with something like a gasp. "But, Dawes, my one consolation here is that the boy can get an education." She rose from her chair and stood before him in militant slimness; and the husband remembered the time when she had stationed herself between himself and Muir Bratchell, each holding a gun in his hand and nursing fierce anger in his heart. Not often did her gentle acknowledgment of his authority give way to any gesture of rebellion or defiance. Now her words came slowly but with an Amazon spirit which he recognized.

"When you left me there at home, Dawes," she said slowly, but with a dangerous quietness, "I waited and trusted you. Everybody eyed me askance and I knew what they were saying behind my back, but I held my faith in you an' looked 'em all straight in the eye." Under the surge of her agitation the colour came again into her face, and at times her speech slipped into an older and laxer idiom.

"When you sent fer me I followed you straightway. I followed you into a life I didn't know an' one that affrighted me—one that affrights me still. I've always loved ye, an' I loves ye still; but it's come to me to realize that I love the boy even more than I love *you*. That boy has got the right to be educated. He's got the right to grow up sincere and natural. I'll fight fer him while there's breath in my body—an' if need be, Dawes, I'll fight fer him with *you*."

Her words had come tumbling in a hot cascade of emotion; and when she had finished, the man with the vivid eyes stood looking into her face in a sort of

wonderment. It was a face which had kindled under the transport of her agitation, and brought back colour to the pallid cheeks, light to the dark eyes. It awoke in him a sense of drama. It was with such eyes and such colour that she had given herself to him at first, and, for a moment, Dawes felt a hot resurgence of the old passion that had swept him long ago. He came over and took both her hands. His voice had in it the softness she had almost forgotten. He, too, was talking mountain parlance now, yet even in his moment of approximate sincerity he was more than half acting.

"Honey," he said, "I wouldn't hev ye feel none otherwise. But when it comes to fighting fer the boy, I reckon we'll fight side by side an' not one against the other. I wants he shall be educated—an' he shall be. But if he's a born artist I want his genius educated, too. It's not goin' to harm him none ef he can grow up ter be a great actor; an' I believe he's got it in him."

"You've got it in you, too, Dawes," she argued desperately, yet with diminishing fire. "An' yet we're flat broke. Seems like art ain't enough."

Dawes Fleetwell laughed reassuringly.

"It's a hard fight," he said, "but all good fights are hard. And it isn't ended. Victory lies ahead!" His eyes leaped into glowing fervour—the ever rekindling fervour of the gambler's incurable optimism. "Victory and fame," he said. "They're rightfully ours. And we don't aim to weaken, do we?"

CHAPTER X

IN COMPANY with Attorney Codington, Inspector Crandall presented himself at Bellevue Hospital several days after the admittance there of the unknown young man who had been picked up with a broken head and a fifty-thousand-dollar check.

"What can you tell me to-day?" he demanded of the physician in charge of the ward. "Have there been any developments?"

"Yes," answered the doctor briskly. "The patient won't die. He was badly mauled and bruised. Brain concussion—but it was the sort of thing that he might be expected to recover from fairly soon."

"Good!" exclaimed the inspector. "Who does he say he is? Maybe you had better let me talk to him."

The physician shook his head.

"He doesn't say who he is, and I'm afraid you can't talk to him—though you are welcome to try."

Crandall's forehead wrinkled in perplexity.

"I don't quite follow you," he said. "If he doesn't want to reveal his identity perhaps I can persuade him."

"That's the point, Inspector. He's developed into a case of amnesia or something worse. It's not that the patient is defiant or stubborn. He can't tell us who he is—because he doesn't know."

"His mind is affected, then?"

The doctor nodded.

"His mind is a blank, and while it's too soon to make predictions, I'm afraid when he leaves here it will be for an asylum. Maybe he would have been luckier to die."

Crandall stood with his hands thrust into his coat pockets. Then he suggested evenly:

"Sometimes, Doctor, we get cases of very clever feigning along these lines."

The medical man's response was a trifle stiff.

"In a place like this I have become quite familiar with them," he said. "I'm pretty well satisfied this patient isn't putting up a game on us. However, he's there. You can, of course, reach your own decision."

"Will it be harmful to him for me to see what I make of it—to try questioning him?"

"Not at all. It's not a case of mental fatigue which must be guarded against undue taxing. It's the case of a man whose mental processes have lapsed into complete inertia. As I said before, he may come out of it in whole or in part—or he may go on with a totally wrecked mind. That's for time to tell."

The inspector made his way into the psychopathic observation ward still accompanied by the lawyer, and on a hospital bed lay a young man whose face was wholly empty and pathetically void of expression. His eyes were open under his bandages and he was conscious, but for him consciousness spelled little beyond animal life.

"Son," began the big-bodied man, taking a chair by the bed, "are you feeling better to-day?"

The young man looked stupidly at and through

the face of this stranger, and his lips stirred, but from them came only the disorder of a rambling incoherence which was a travesty on speech.

Tactfully and with the patient skill of experience, Crandall approached him from many divergent angles, seeking some lead upon which the straying memory and the disrupted mental machinery might lay hold—and all his attempts were vain.

"The doctor is right," he admitted at last. "This isn't acting. It's real enough and tragic enough. He had a check from Archibald. He was taken for a ride —and now he can't talk, can't think, can't remember."

The attorney had been standing behind the inspector's back, looking down.

"I didn't want to interrupt you," he said soberly, "but if you're through questioning I've something to say."

"What is it?"

"I don't know that boy's name, but I've seen him, and I've seen him in Archibald's office."

"When?" demanded the inspector, and the lawyer shook his head.

"How can I say? Perhaps six months ago, perhaps three. He was employed there in some capacity or other, stenographer, clerk, what not? But he hasn't been there lately. He meant nothing more to me than any other detail of the place. When he ceased to be there I never missed him."

"Good," said the inspector. "At least, that brings us somewhere. Other employees can tell us about him.

Let's get some member of Archibald's office force here right away."

But that was not necessary.

An orderly came in and called the inspector aside.

"There's a woman here," he said, "who wants to see your man. She says her son has disappeared."

In the room where such requests are received Crandall found himself face to face with a middle-aged woman, tidily dressed but haggard of eye and shaken of bearing. She was standing with her hands at her sides and trembling slightly as one may who has held herself together through a long suspense and at last stands at the threshold of possible ordeal; one who must question the truth, yet dreads what answer may be found.

"Did you want to see the unidentified patient?" asked the inspector in a steadying voice, and at first she could only nod.

"Did you read of this case in the papers?" asked Crandall, and she shook her head.

"I don't have much time for the papers," she told him. "I work in a millinery shop and I do outside sewing besides. It keeps me pretty busy."

"How did you learn," the inspector asked her, "that there was someone here who might be——?"

He paused, and she began speaking rapidly.

"You see, sir, Jim had been away from town for two months—a little over two months. He went to take work as a secretary with somebody in Chicago. Ten days ago he came home——"

"Take your time," urged the inspector. "If this

man is your son he's not going to die. He may recover entirely. Take your time."

"Can't I go to him? Can't I see him now?"

Crandall nodded his head.

"Yes," he told her in a gentle voice, "but in cases like this—you see he seems to have been assaulted—we have to ask questions. Perhaps it will be easier for you to answer them first."

The woman nodded with an air of resignation.

"Jim had seemed worried over something ever since he got back. He wouldn't tell me what it was. He seemed to have some money. He gave me some so I don't think it was financial worry."

"Yes."

"He said he was going back to Chicago soon, but he wouldn't have gone without telling me, and I've written there to his old address. The letter came back."

"I understand. When did he leave your house last?"

"Five days ago. When I got home from the shop he wasn't there. That didn't worry me much at first—he sometimes stayed away for a day or so. But when the time went on—I wrote my letter—and it was returned from Chicago. Then I kept getting more and more frightened. At last I was frantic."

"And still you had seen nothing of the newspaper item about the unidentified man?"

"No."

"Did you just come here on the chance?"

"No, sir." She shuddered as she added: "I went down to the Missing Persons Bureau. There were

other people there and they all looked as tragic as ghosts. There is a sort of waiting room——"

"Yes I know the place," he assured her. "So they sent you over here?"

"Yes, sir. The captain in charge there talked to me. He was so kind——"

"Yes, I know him, too."

"He looked through a lot of little slips and then he said the description seemed to fit. He sent a man with me to show me the way—and so I came here."

"Madam, what is your son's name? He hasn't been able to tell us."

"Jim. James A. Poynter. He's named for his father."

"What did he do before he went to Chicago?"

"He had several jobs—all of them clerical or secretarial. You see, he'd been through college."

The inspector steadied her with his quiet eyes.

"Did he ever work for Clem W. Archibald?"

"Yes, sir, and Mr. Archibald liked him. Poor Mr. Archibald!"

"Why did he leave there?"

"He said the offer from Chicago paid a better salary, and Mr. Archibald advised him to accept it. Mr. Archibald gave him a new suit of clothes when he went."

"And you say that was two months ago?"

"Yes, sir, or a little longer."

"Madam," the inspector told her soberly, "your son, if this is your son, has had a blow on the head. For the time being he can remember nothing. What sort of a boy was he? Did he give you trouble?"

"No, sir. He was a good boy and ambitious. When he got impatient with me it was because of being so ambitious. He used to fret because he didn't get along and make money faster, yet he almost always had work—good work for a young man."

"And his companionships were wholesome?"

"Oh, I am sure they were, sir. But he was never much of a hand for talking about his affairs. That hurt me a little. I thought he might have confided in me more than he did."

"I won't keep you waiting any longer," Crandall told her. "Let us go and answer the question that's torturing you—and remember, if you find it's your boy, he may come out of this all right."

Inside the ward the woman clasped her hands over her face.

"That's Jim," she said brokenly. "That's my Jim."

But she could tell no more than she had already told, and those who had been fellow employees at the Archibald office, though they substantiated her story in every particular of common knowledge, could add nothing to its fullness.

The young man had worked there; had been liked by his fellows and his employer and had gone away of his own volition. Beyond that—nothing.

Inspector Crandall presented himself at the office of J. G. Smith and without circumlocution stated his business.

"I suppose you've been receiving congratulations from my superiors, Mr. Smith," he said, "and I suppose you know those congratulations are from the

lips out. I didn't come around or have anything to say until the papers announced definitely that you were undertaking this business."

"I'm glad you came at last, Inspector," the lawyer answered with a welcoming smile, "and your congratulations are none the less appreciated—for being tardier and more sincere than the rest."

"But I have no congratulations to offer," contradicted the detective. "I have as high regard for you as any other man, and I know your record, but on mixing into a thankless job like this, I don't see how you are to be called lucky."

"I'm not climbing aboard this wagon with the idea of taking a pleasure jaunt," Smith offered reminder. "I fancy it will be a fairly rocky jaunt."

"We're finding it so, and it will be rockier for an amateur than a professional," declared Crandall. "There never has been one of these outside clean-up jobs that has been worth a damn. I hate to sound like a crape-hanger, but if we're to work together I must be honest with you. You have everything to lose in this enterprise and nothing to gain, so far as I can see."

"None the less, Inspector, we are going before the grand jury with the mayor's sanction, and we want to go armed with facts. You can show us the way to get such facts."

"To what end?" The gray eyes clouded seriously. "To make a splash in the newspapers and tip our hand to organized crime when we ought to be playing our cards close to the chest. We cops are trying to fill inside straights a good part of the time, Mr. Smith.

When we catch what we need it's just our job; and when we don't fill the draw we get hell."

"Of course," admitted the attorney. "Lay crusades against crime have too often accomplished nothing. Yet, unless there were some police inefficients, or worse—with their hands out and their eyes shut—crime couldn't flourish as arrogantly as it does just now in this town of ours."

Crandall relighted his pipe and studied its bowl.

"Granted," he said briefly. "But what's the answer?"

"The answer seems to be that the public calls for outside help in solving the crime problem. Why is it that you can't trust your whole police personnel?"

The inspector looked up. He had a directness of speech which carried a disarming stamp of candour, as though his interest was solely concerned with the statement of authentic facts and wholly indifferent to their effect upon the hearer.

"Now, Mr. Smith, for a man of your sense and experience, I call that a damned dumb question. Crime to-day is organized. It is opulent. It has a war chest. It's no longer the petty affair of some scattered, single-handed wretches. We live in an era of quick getaways in fast cars and of constantly moving currents and shifting channels. Moreover, crime pays its way as it never did in the past."

"And it also pays some policemen very well?"

Crandall shrugged. "That's obvious. Men don't love to risk the chair any more than they used to," he said tersely. "If they rob mail trucks and express messengers to the tune of a quarter million at a crack

and get away with it, it's not because they are more careless of their lives than their daddies were before them; it's because they are better organized for big business and big rewards—and they can pay bribes."

"And that is what we want to get into in an effective way."

"So do we all—want to. With all due respect to you, you are a brilliant amateur mixing into a game that you can't beat. You will perhaps show up a few crooked cops—cops that I can show up myself if you give me time. Out of ten thousand men drawing small salaries there are some who can be debauched by the high jack. You may learn and publish the names of some stool pigeons and snitchers, and they will make other stories for the papers by being found dead. When the squall blows over, organized crime will resume business at the old stand, and that will be that."

"However, despite your little faith, you will help me?"

Again the inspector shrugged.

"I've got to be shown," he insisted. "Of course the department has orders to coöperate, and I must obey those orders. This far, at least, you can rely on me. I'll be honest with you even if I am, as you say, one of little faith."

CHAPTER XI

On the balustrade of the courthouse steps at Peril Town, Brother Bud Featherstone, the self-ordained evangelist, swung broganned and bare-ankled feet while he harangued a crowd of loiterers on the evils of violence and the virtues of brotherly love. In the prisoners' dock of the court room itself sat his kinsman Red Bill Featherstone, and in the penetrating eyes of that old feudist there was nothing devout except hate.

Red Bill was being tried for his life. The commonwealth of Kentucky charged him with the unprovoked assassination of Judge Wilbur Fosdick, who, in pursuance of his duty as prosecuting attorney, had been seeking to hang Red Bill for the alleged and prior murder of Atilla Lockridge.

The old defendant had a leonine head and a wind-tanned face which might have served as a model for one of those countenances in the frieze of the prophets. Now he gazed over the crowded court room with fiercely indomitable eyes, which were confident and slightly scornful. He had been tried before but no jury had yet dared to convict him. With the recent lesson of what it cost to hound him standing so clear before their memories, it seemed unlikely that the present panel would do other than acquit.

The dusty windows of the court room stood open

and from the mountain slopes drowsing against a dreamy sky came the fragrances of fall, fragrances which even in these days aroused an old ache in Muir Bratchell's heart.

A wholly deceptive air of sleepy boredom pervaded the ancient chamber of assizes, and an elderly stranger, whose apparel and bearing stamped him as a man of lowland consequence, thought, as he sat near the rail of the bar, that he had never seen a trial which involved issues of life and death going forward with a more leisurely or emotionless routine. He watched Red Bill Featherstone sitting with outward unconcern beside his counsel at the defense table and, inexperienced in the paradoxes of mountain life, failed to realize that in a fashion this way the prosecution of a tribal monarch, who acknowledged no inherent right in law courts to "hamper him in duress."

Muir Bratchell, sitting by a table below the judge's bench, had noted this stranger from time to time as the trial had progressed and he had been impressed by the bearing of distinction which proclaimed itself in a lean but regular face with its grayed temples and its close-cropped moustache. But that had been a matter of fleeting realization, for just now there were nearer and more imperative calls on Muir's attention.

Now there came a pause in the proceedings marked by the shuffling of coarsely shod feet and cleared throats of expectancy. Deliberately, Muir pushed back his chair and rose to his feet before the crude dais of justice. For a moment he looked in thoughtful silence about the old court room which had been the theatre of many human melodramas and which bore

on its walls the bullet scars of fierce law defiance in the past. Now it became his theatre and he was answering his cue.

"May it please your honour, and your good citizenship, gentlemen of the jury," he began with a slow, well-modulated tempo of tone. "Before the Commonwealth begins its argument for conviction I will ask your brief indulgence while I make clear my position here as spokesman for the State."

The brows of the distinguished-looking stranger gathered in a slight scowl. This young man who stood as the representative of the prosecution seemed to be prefacing his argument with an apology for undertaking his duty. If that were his spirit he would perform that duty with the tepid half-heartedness of a formula. This, then, was the supine attitude of mountain justice. It seemed an acknowledgment of feudal power and arrogance; an acceptance by officers walking in fear of their lives, of individual insolence and murderous reprisal as inherent rights.

From things he had heard the stranger had hoped for a different attitude in Muir Bratchell.

But the young lawyer was swinging into a more rapid utterance and his voice was taking on a deeper and more earnest resonance.

"I wasn't elected to this high office of prosecutor by your votes," Muir was saying. "I stand here before you in another man's shoes—a better man's. I hold only the mandate of the governor's temporary appointment to carry through the work of the man who was shot down in the performance of his duty and shot down, as the State charges, because of that faith-

ful performance by the orders of this defendant who sits before you." He paused and stood looking at Red Bill Featherstone with studious eyes, and Red Bill gazed back with a brazen and disdainful effrontery.

"I'd been practising law for several years in the office of Judge Wilbur Fosdick, your Commonwealth's attorney," went on Muir. "My shingle hung under the one he had used for so many years of honourable practice, and when this same William Featherstone sat here at his last trial charged with the wilful murder of old Atilla Lockridge I worked as Judge Fosdick's unofficial helper in preparing the case for the State." Again the young man paused, and his voice dropped to a timbre of sincere eulogy.

"Judge Fosdick was ripe in wisdom and strong in courage," he said. "Now he has paid a price as high as his courage was high and he lies dead. I follow him in right sorry comparison but I've been bequeathed the duty he served and died for and I aim to make up in my spirit of determination what I lack of ability. I come before you as the heir of a better man, pleading with you that he shall not have died in vain."

The scowl had cleared from the stranger's face and he leaned back again in his chair. This, he reflected, was better.

"You men of Hemlock County," went on the young prosecutor rapidly, "know as well as I do the long and bloody history of the Featherstone-Lockridge feud. You know that after twenty years of fitful flarings and gutterings—after taking the toll of a dozen lives—it seemed at last to have quieted into the blessed promise of peace. Then you know how one spring

day, as he rode the thicketed bed of Squabble Creek, old Atilla Lockridge slid from his saddle with a bullet through his back, and how his mule stood over him with its head hanging until he was found. Your grand jury, after grave and due consideration, brought a true bill against this accused, and with his characteristic energy Judge Fosdick took up his task of proof and punishment. He did not undertake it lightly. He knew the perils of antagonizing the Featherstone clan. So well he knew it that before he came into this court he set his affairs in order—and outlined his evidence to me so that if his lips should be prematurely sealed by death what he had done in preparation might not be wholly lost and buried with him."

There was a pause and a tense stillness over the room.

"When this man, Red Bill Featherstone, was brought here a prisoner for that other trial he came defiantly and boastfully just as he comes now. He held himself above the law. He thought he was bigger than the Court. Behind him stood his fighting kith and kin—but the State went on with his prosecution. Then one noontime, while this court recessed and while the prosecuting attorney stood there, under the hickory tree that spreads its shade by the front door, there came the sharp crack of a rifle gun and Judge Fosdick turned his head in curiosity. He was looking speculatively at a window across the street where there was the faint curl of vapour and a light stench of saltpetre. He felt as if some one had pushed against him in a crowd—and as he opened his lips to speak a

trickle of blood showed at the corners of his mouth and his knees gave way like loose hinges."

Muir Bratchell paused and looked into the faces of the jury panel. Somehow in the conversational evenness of his voice pitch there was a more authentic drama than would have been invested in elocution. He went on again.

"They buried him with forefathers that had built up this country of yours and mine. His labours were over, and because I was familiar with the work which an assassin had cut short, it seemed fitting to the governor to appoint me for his unexpired term. That's why I'm here to-day instead of a better man—not because I'm a good lawyer but because I know the facts."

Muir Bratchell left his place beside his own table and strode over to stand before Red Bill Featherstone. His jaws were as hard now as those of a steel trap, and his eyes were like lighted agate.

"Red Bill Featherstone," he made vehement declaration, "I know full well that I stand as Judge Fosdick's heir to all the venomous hatreds that brought him to his death. I know that I have no hope to escape whatever revengeance you and your murder-loving kinsmen have the power to visit on me—and I aim to hang you none the less. Too long have you gone unhalted the ways of destruction, like a human mad dog no man dared to chain. The time has come not only to chain you but to destroy you. You convicted yourself of the assassination of Atilla Lockridge when you murdered Fosdick. Our juries in the

past have been bled pale by fear and have condoned such infamies. If they have punished at all they have punished only with short prison terms. But the evidence in this trial is so clear and unmistakable that with anything like a candle's glow of honesty and courage burning in that jury box I shall send you, not to any state prison but to the gallows. If God's high justice still draws even a faint breath in this country I shall hang you by your neck till you're dead. I shall brand you with the disgrace of the black cap and the noose, and when they cut you down you will still not be dishonoured in the full measure of your deserts."

The stranger glanced at the face of the accused, withered suddenly to an ugly balefulness, then he settled back while for an hour between the walls of the old court room rang and reverberated such waves of castigation and malediction as seemed to rock them like imprisoned thunders.

Here in naked vigour was the art of the philippic.

Versed in court-room psychology, the stranger perceived a change gradually but certainly developing on the features of the twelve men in the jury box. It was as if under some alchemy of the mind they were stirring apprehensively out of their initial lethargy and refashioning their attitudes into austere and iron shapes of resolve. Unless they were swept back by counter-argument or succumbed to old timidities in the privacy of the closed jury room, they would convict.

At length Muir Bratchell went back to his table.

"That is all, gentlemen of the jury," he said. "I lay down my task and leave the fate of this felon a

matter between your consciences and your God. If you do less than send him to the gallows, in the face of such indubitable proof, you must become, in a sense, his accomplices. It is the way of lawyers to flatter juries, but I am in no mood to flatter you to-day. My old friend is murdered and his slayer sits red-handed before you, arrogant in his felony because he believes you walk in terror of his murderous power. If you suffer him again to go at large it will not be because you doubt his guilt, but because you fear his vengeance. Take the case and do your duties—or wear his brand of Cain, along with him."

It was with a wearied and somewhat haggard face that the young prosecutor glanced up when after an hour of deliberation a knock sounded from inside the jury room and the panel trooped in. It was with a fatalistic shrug rather than surprise that he heard the verdict read: "We, the jury, find the defendant guilty of manslaughter, and fix his punishment at imprisonment for the term of two years."

Later still the judge commanded the prisoner to stand up.

"William Featherstone, have you anything to say," inquired his honour formally, "showing just cause why this court should not now pronounce sentence upon you?"

The accused lifted his shaggy beard and high cheekbones, with narrowed and savagely blazing eyes, as he rose from his seat to sweep the court room with a stoical contempt.

"I reckon, Jedge, thar hain't skeercely no avail of

my a-sayin' aught more then what I've done a'ready said," he declared. "I've done been foun' guilty on ther ev*idence* of men thet hev done lied on oath. I don't misdoubt none ther jury done what they 'lowed ter be thar duty. Es fer them thet swore ter lies erginst me—I'll hev ample leisure down thar in Frankfort ter study erbout 'em."

He paused, and his lips curled scornfully. "I hain't ergoin' ter penitenshery no man fer false swearin'. Thet haint my way. I don't run hollerin' like a crybaby ter no law co't ter sottle my own affairs. I've done always tended ter them right fer myself—an' I aims ter go on in like fashion. I won't sulter in ther penitenshery forever."

The convicted man paused, then he wheeled and stretched out a long arm with a pointed finger, passionately shaken, in the face of the prosecutor.

His voice rose to a thunderous volume of fury.

"I don't need no time ter study erbout *you,* Muir Bratchell. Ye hain't hardly tarried in Jericho long enough fer yore beard ter grow. Ye're jest a brash young whippersnapper thet's done rushed in whar angels feared ter tread. Ye've done picked yore choice. Now I forewarns ye——"

The judge's gavel fell with a resounding crash.

"This is all out of order," he announced curtly. "If that's all you have to say——"

But Red Bill's voice overrode other sounds with the roar of a gale.

"I forewarns ye—an' I calls on God A'mighty fer my witness, when I comes out, Muir Bratchell—ef

somebody else hain't done a'ready got ye, *I* aims ter get ye."

The young prosecutor was sitting with his chair tilted back. Now he answered with a seeming of wearied indifference.

"When you get out I reckon I'll be right here."

The sun was close to the wooded ridges that same afternoon as Muir sat alone in the dingy and sparsely furnished office to which Judge Fosdick had been carried and in which he had died. Before him were a few battered books and a litter of foolscap paper, and the lawyer sat facing the open door, but bent over his desk. He had heard no approach but he became conscious of a shadow across the amber light and in an instant he was standing by his overturned chair with an automatic pistol in his hand.

As instantly as he had come to his feet, armed, he dropped the weapon to the table top and said, "I crave your pardon. I didn't know who it might be. Hereabouts folks usually announce themselves."

"It is I who should apologize," declared the visitor. "I am not yet familiar with mountain etiquette. I didn't mean to seem furtive."

The stranger with the distinguished face and the urbane apparel, who had piqued Muir's curiosity in the courthouse, entered the office, and Bratchell noted that the greeting with a drawn gun had caused him neither to flinch nor to fall into any manifestation of momentary excitement.

The stranger had also made an observation. He had been wondering whether the young lawyer's

lethargic acceptance of Featherstone's threat had not been merely a sort of dull and uncomprehending foolhardiness. Now he recognized the alertness of this other man's full appraisal. He knew that Bratchell recognized the shadowing of his danger not only as a thing awaiting the other's release from prison, but as a more immediate jeopardy at the hands of some avenging kinsman.

"I noted you in the co'te room," said Muir, and the visitor smiled as he answered, "Where you were already rather busy. The fact is I came here to see you and I waited until you were less occupied."

"You came to see me?"

"Yes. My name," replied the other man smiling quietly, "wouldn't mean much to you, I dare say. It's a rather common name, Smith. I'm from New York and you were commended to me as one who knew this country and its resources as few men do."

"Mr. Smith from New York," mused Bratchell. "Do you mean J. G. Smith of Smith & Welligan?"

"I'm flattered," declared the stranger. "I didn't suspect that I was known so far from home."

"But you've just told me," the young hillsman reminded him, "that I'd been named to you for a man who knew this country and its resources. Why wouldn't I know the names of people who bear the repute of bein' most interested in developing those same resources?"

Mr. Smith nodded. "That's my line, coal, timber, and railroads to haul them out," he admitted. "Those resources have been sleeping here—undeveloped: sleeping a good distance from outlets. You can

be of great assistance to us, if we can get together."

Muir Bratchell rose from his chair and gazed off at the purple contours etched magnificently against the amber sky line.

"I reckon I've always done a right lavish amount of dreaming," he said. "Them dreams have had a good deal to do with waking up a land where wealth slept under the mountains and poverty stalked above ground. That's how come I've studied about the things you're interested in."

The visitor nodded.

"I know that mountain folk distrust outside exploitation. Our ideas of developing your resources don't involve piracy. They're to be mutually advantageous, but we need an ambassador of good will who can make the native mind see that."

"I reckon I've got a fair idea of your scheme," the young lawyer told him. "That's why I'm willin' to talk to you. Prosperity won't hurt a country where, in our own words, folks are hurtin' for the needcessities of life—but how come you to light on me, Mr. Smith?"

"I talked with men in Louisville and Lexington. They told me that if I could get you to go back with me to New York I would carry a human compendium of authentic information with me. Then I saw you in court."

Muir nodded and his eyes were deeply meditative.

"You say you want me to go back to New York with you?"

"I do. As the guest of our interests—for consultation."

The young Kentuckian felt quite abruptly the poverty of his plain clothes and the crudity of his backwoods upbringing. A sort of stage fright for the great city of which he knew only from his reading swept him and he saw himself as a barbarian in Rome; but his visitor read nothing of that in his face and his answer came with terse directness.

"When the term of court ends here I'll be footloose for a spell. I've never been to New York but I reckon I'll never go younger."

Mr. Smith nodded with satisfaction as he lighted a cigarette.

"I was particularly interested in your handling of that murder case," he said, "because though I'm a corporation lawyer myself I'm mixed up just now in some criminal matters that are rather new to me."

"I was thinking of your firm," admitted Bratchell, "as mining engineers and the like, but of course it's the legal end of it that you handle. How come you to get into criminal law, Mr. Smith?"

The New Yorker shrugged his shoulder. "That's a long story," he commented, "and we'll have time to go into it later. Certain alleged interlockings between organized crime and political henchmen have been disturbing the peace of mind of my town. Organizations that take such things to heart have retained us to wage war on the abuses. We have a bit of a reputation at home."

Muir nodded sober acquiescence. "You've got a reputation that's managed to trickle through to ignorant men like me, here in hills where we don't hear any lavish of news," he offered testimony.

CHAPTER XII

MUIR BRATCHELL stood on the roof of his hotel near Washington Square, looking across the sky-wide stretch of the roofs about him. He smiled quietly to himself as he surveyed the immensity of a new world.

Around him was this seemingly boundless compactness of a mighty city, an enormity which he had hitherto imagined without the verification of any actuality; and his smile was for the shortcomings of his preconception.

But always the eyes of the hillsman came back to the leaning, Gargantuan pipes, which rose over the western housetops, for he knew they were the stacks of great steamers that crossed what his people still called, as Walter Raleigh had called it, the "ocean sea."

He looked over at the Jefferson Market clock. "An' by that same token," he told himself, "I'd better be getting up there to Mr. Smith's office. That's what I'm here for."

Muir had been told that, in maintaining his office in one of the tall buildings north of Forty-second Street, his host was making an exception to a general rule which segregated lawyers among the cliff dwellers in the downtown cañons.

He was glad of this, however, because he liked to

turn at the arch and make his way on foot up the Avenue, walking among the amazing wonders that stretched there under the colour of the sun.

The building into which at length he turned interested the man from the hills, and he paused inside the entrance hall to survey the groined and gilded ceilings and to make comment on visual details which would have been commonplace to more accustomed eyes. The tiers of elevators, behind their rows of grilled doors, fascinated him, to whom the reaching of a height had always meant climbing slopes that were "right steep an' la'rely."

He stood in a briskly moving counterflow of humanity, noting detached details—such as the fact that one complete battery of elevators were marked, *Express above the Tenth Floor*. He paused to gaze curiously, yet so quietly that he seemed wholly incurious, at the bronze automatic board on which a system of lighted tubes recorded, for the benefit of a magnificently uniformed functionary, just where each car was at any given moment.

When he had killed his few extra minutes, watching meanwhile the bronze clock on the wall, Muir entered an express elevator and was whisked to the twentieth floor.

In the anteroom of the suite occupied by Smith & Welligan sat several waiting clients, but the young countryman was promptly ushered into another room, whose door bore the legend:

J. G. SMITH. PRIVATE.

Olivia Cary had smiled on the tall young man from the far hills of Kentucky, and he had thought her very gracious. He could not guess that he was, to her, not an entire stranger nor one devoid of certain romance. But she had read of him in Carl Warren's letters, and her greeting had been for a character stepping out of written pages.

Inside the office Muir hesitated because besides the man with the gray temples and the distinguished bearing, there sat another, and the attitudes of both indicated a grave preoccupation.

"Maybe I'm overprompt," apologized the mountaineer. "I can wait outside if you're busy."

But Smith laughed. "No," he declared. "As a matter of fact you can make the third in our conference. Until Mr. Welligan gets here we can't go ahead with our Hemlock County affairs; but this is a man I want you to meet."

Muir was struck first with the difference in the types of the two men who sat on either side of the broad mahogany office table. His impression of Smith had already become fixed—that of a keen and forceful man who was unobtrusively but clearly the aristocrat. Now he looked steadily at the second man and that man looked as steadily back.

The face was a pleasant face and its keen gray eyes carried a light that sometimes twinkled and that, one guessed, could quickly harden into jets of resoluteness. Such eyes could become dangerous when they narrowed a little.

The lawyer made the introductions and Muir flushed with embarrassment when his sponsor some-

what colourfully sketched his portrait as a prosecutor in a feud-ridden land, but the stranger offered no comment, merely nodding, as though such stories were not entirely remote from his own experience.

"Inspector Crandall," summarized Smith, "is the directing mind in the detective bureau, Mr. Bratchell. I'm seeking help from an expert. Like yourself, he is not a born New Yorker. He's a Tennessean by birth."

"I've been various things in various places," the big man offered in laconic explanation. "Now I've settled down to the business of a hard-boiled and overworked cop."

Crandall rammed tobacco into the bowl of his pipe with the flat head of a silver pencil and smiled as he went on. "I'm just telling Mr. Smith here that I don't take a hell of a lot of stock in these periodic housecleaning flurries of the *pro bono publicos*. They just roil up the puddle and give the D. A.'s office and the police a bad name. And we cops don't need any help in getting a bad name."

Smith shrugged and smiled.

"The inspector and I," he observed for the benefit of his latest caller, "have our quarrels when we meet, but we end by pulling together. I know he's honest and capable and he knows I'm honest. By the way, Crandall, how is the boy at the hospital, young Poynter?"

"The same," replied the detective moodily. "It's doubtful whether he ever recovers. Looks like a case of a mind left blank—a slate wiped clean—and if he could talk——"

"Yes, I know. If he could talk he could tell us."

"It might be wise to remember him, as we work," announced Crandall. "Other possible witnesses might get the same dose—or worse."

"What we started talking about was taking Sergeant Mahaffey before the grand jury. Try to keep any advance notice of that out of the papers, Mr. Smith. Mahaffey knows as much underworld as any man in town, and the underworld can guess how much Mahaffey knows. They'd go far to silence him, once they're tipped off that he's got to talk under oath."

"If there's any leak in advance," declared Smith soberly, "it won't be through my office."

"So far," admitted the police officer, "the gangsters and racketeers aren't taking your efforts too seriously. I hear they are wise-cracking good-naturedly and contemptuously about it—so far. Keep 'em doing that as long as you can. A scornful enemy is off his guard, but a scared clam shuts up tight."

"There's another thing," smiled Mr. Smith. "I'm not deeply versed in the night life along Broadway, and in view of the publicity I'm getting it mightn't be the wisest thing for me to take it up now." The attorney paused and smiled as though in appreciation of his own jest. "I might, as you term it, get bumped off."

The police officer did not smile but responded in a matter-of-fact voice:

"Perhaps your little joke isn't as funny as you think it, at that."

Smith laughed and went on:

"What I was going to ask is this. Mr. Bratchell is our guest here in town. He wants to get metropolitan

glimpses from varied angles and his symposium should include Broadway by night."

Crandall grinned.

"Sure, I get you," he responded readily enough. "I'll be his guide, philosopher, and friend. I'll be glad to play dragoman. Doing anything particular tonight, Mr. Bratchell?"

"No, sir, unless Mr. Smith wants to use me. He's my boss right now."

"I'll be at your hotel this evening. No, better yet, you come down to headquarters and let me show you around there. Then we'll dine somewhere and visit a few places. I can point out certain celebrities that the guides don't call by name through their megaphones."

That evening, after an hour of tempered amazement for the scope and magnitude of police machinery in this colossal town, as swiftly indicated to him by Inspector Crandall, Muir sat with his new acquaintance in a restaurant not far from Longacre Square. At the same table with them sat a man with grizzled temples and a sage but hard-bitten Irish face. That man was Sergeant Mahaffey of the Broadway squad. Muir was hearing inside stories of police work from lips that spoke out of experience, and surprise was attending him along the way of narrative.

"Now," said Crandall, pushing back his chair, "how about a show? Mahaffey leaves us here but we are still foot-loose. What shall it be? A girl-and-music riot, or three hours of psychoanalysis by a heavy-handed layman? Perhaps you have some favourite and particular star in mind?"

Muir shook his head and smiled deprecatingly.

"Mr. Crandall, it's right civil of you to pretend that we hill-billies know one actor from another; but you know better."

But suddenly the mountaineer looked up, and spoke with a note of interest.

"There was a man from our neck of the woods who came to New York some time back to be an actor. I reckon by now he's right famous."

As the country lawyer paused Crandall reached for his pipe and nodded; but he offered no comment, and Muir went on:

"It looked right impossible for a man like him to come to as big a place as this—and get on. Folks back home expected to hear that he'd starved to death. But letters from his wife brought tidings that amazed folks—tidings of right outstanding success."

Crandall repressed a smile and responded gravely:

"Was there corroboration of this bird's celebrity besides his wife's admitting it?"

"Yes, sir. She backed it up with articles that had been printed in newspapers," testified Bratchell. "I reckon it's got to be admitted all right."

"And this man was a friend of yours?"

Muir's lips suddenly tightened and his eyes narrowed.

"No," he said shortly, "an enemy. His name's Dawes Fleetwell. Just the same, if he's acting right here in town, I've got a notion to go and see him."

Crandall appeared preoccupied with his pipe bowl as he rammed down the tobacco with his flat pencil end.

"Dawes Fleetwell," he repeated vaguely. "Since he's no bosom friend of yours it won't hurt your feelings to know that I never heard of him. Have you, Mahaffey?"

The officer of the Broadway squad puckered his brows in an effort to place the name.

"It seems to me I've met an actor that wears some such name—but I've never seen him in a part. Is he a big upstanding lad with a bright, bold eye in his head and a swagger in his way of walkin'?"

"That's him."

"I'm after seein' him, then, along Broadway. He throws a noble front, if he's the lad I'm thinkin' of. The women twist their necks to look at him and he don't make 'em look twice. But if he ever set the main stem on fire it must have been when I was off duty."

Muir's eyes smouldered for a moment, and as he sat silent the old detective, whose brain was a card index of countless names and faces, raked something half buried out of his miscellany of memories.

"Hold on," he suggested. "Maybe this fellow has passed his job along. There 's a kid doing a child's part in a melodrama at the Star. He got hot notices when he went into the caste not long ago. Took another boy's place. Some critics call him the Jackie Coogan of the speaking stage. His name was Fleetwell—Cawdon Fleetwell. Does that get us anywhere?"

"Yes, it gets us somewhere," answered Muir, and his voice was strange. "Cawdon was the wife's name. So he's hiring out the boy while he sports with women on the boy's wages. That sounds right likely, too."

"You knew his wife?" Crandall's eyes were speculative, though he spoke casually.

"Yes," Muir said, nodding. "I knew her once—right well."

"Maybe, then," suggested the police officer, "that's one good show to lay off of—if the man is your enemy—and you knew his wife."

But Muir shook his head. He followed the trend of thought which was shaping in the logical mind of his guide, and he answered its unspoken content.

"No. That's the show I want to see, since you proffer to let me choose my pick. I'm not here bearing old grudges. I can let bygones be bygones." He paused and added soberly: "If need be I reckon Dawes and me—Dawes and I—could meet and make our manners after this long a spell."

If Crandall was disapproving he gave no sign, when after the last act of the play in which a small boy easily carried off the honours of the performance, his guest put an inquiry.

"Do you reckon, Mr. Crandall, I could go back there where the actors are and see if his mother is with him? I've got a notion she would be. Like as not she'd be pleasured to hear the news from home."

Strange, reflected Muir, to be calling on Lissy through a stage door. Strange, indeed, to all his inexperience of this life, was the place in which he found himself as the surly doorkeeper grunted: "Dressing Room Three, up the stairs beyond Star A." Impressions came to him there, somewhat confusedly, like broken speech. White brick walls, dark overhead

stretches with hanging weights and rolled drops vaguely bulked. He had a consciousness of lights strung strangely, emphasizing cavernous shadows; then of a climb up a spiral iron stairway that was like a ladder twisted in a cyclone, and of a knock on a door.

In the brief moment between knock and answer Muir found his heart hammering lawlessly. There rose before his eyes other and distant pictures. He seemed standing again with his elbows resting on a battered saddle looking up into the eyes of a girl on a pillion, and beyond her stretched an unimaginable splendour of painted mountains.

Then the door opened and against the yellow light of a wired bulb over a make-up shelf stood Lissy herself. She stood for a moment straight and slender, in clothes that were neither good nor shabby; clothes that seemed to have been originally selected rather to elude than to attract notice, and the girlhood roses were faded from her cheeks. Against the sombre outer murk the figures of the two men were shadow contours, and at first glance she recognized nothing familiar in either. Then Muir stepped forward and the yellow light fell on his ruggedly chiselled features, and caught the piercing keenness of his eyes.

"Howdy, Lissy," he said quietly. "I was in town and I came to see little Cawdon act. I couldn't willingly go away without making my manners."

The woman's lips had parted and her eyes had widened. For just an instant her breast rose and fell agitatedly, and then she held out a hand which was not quite steady.

"Come in, Muir," she invited in a voice which sought self-recovery after sharp surprise, "Cawdon's about ready to go home. You're a sight for sore eyes, Muir, but I couldn't believe my senses at first."

Crandall seated himself on a trunk, chatting good-humouredly with the infantile actor, who seemed still enough of a child to be vastly engaged in the mystifying phenomenon of a coin which was made to vanish and reappear through the inspector's palm. Muir stood talking to Felicity of inconsequential things.

Then a light step sounded and they all looked up to see Dawes Fleetwell standing in the door.

CHAPTER XIII

For an instant Dawes Fleetwell merely stood there and his handsome face was an expressionless mask. Slowly and warily, the detective thought, the eyes of the mountain lawyer and those of the unemployed actor met and engaged. At first neither spoke. Inspector Crandall had risen from the trunk and slipped his coin back into his pocket. He thought of two great dogs eying each other on meeting, with tails stiff and unwagging; with no intimation of sound or growl, yet gauging each other in a dubious indecision which might break into friendly recognition—or in leaps with bared teeth at each other's throats.

Crandall moved a step nearer the door.

Dawes presented a marked contrast to his wife. His clothes were new and considered. His hat sat jauntily on his arrogantly carried head and one gloved hand toyed easily with a malacca stick. Had he just emerged from the dressing room marked "Star A," bound for an hour or two at the Lambs', he need not have bettered his appearance or his air of self-realized distinction.

He was quick enough to make mental note of the ready-made clothing worn by his enemy, the enemy to whom he had never spoken since he laid down the rifle he had taken up for the reckoning. In Muir's appearance was no proclamation of such success as

transformed a man. Obviously, he was still a country lawyer whom some unexplained mission had brought far from home, and as such he might be patronized. Under these conditions Dawes made quick decision, the most relishable and practicable revenge would be to extend the palm of greeting and to dazzle his rustic acquaintance with his own splendour; to impress upon him the full measure of his own worldly advancement.

So Dawes let his white teeth flash in that brilliant smile which switched sudden light into his face and, shifting his walking stick to the crook of his elbow, thrust out a gloved hand. Crandall felt his muscles ease off from an unadmitted strain.

"Well for God's sake," said Dawes easily, "who'd have thought it? Put it there, boy. When did you waft in from the laurel?"

"I saw the show," answered Muir soberly as he barely touched the extended palm, "and I came back to shake hands with Lissy."

"Oh, you were out front. What did you think of the kid? Chip off the old block, eh what?"

The enunciation, the very control of the facial muscles, were elaborately calculated and to Muir as impressive as they were meant to be. He introduced Crandall and heard Dawes saying heartily, "Well met, Inspector. I know some of your colleagues. I was able to put on a little show for Captain Foley not so long ago at one of your picnics. Showed the boys a few things with a rifle and a six-gun. It went big with them."

"I was there," answered Crandall. "Your stuff was

clever. I was trying to recall where I'd seen you before."

"That was one place," Dawes assured him, "and quite probably you have seen me across the lights. Just now I'm resting while a new act is being written for me."

At the stage door Lissy pleaded that the child must be put to bed, but Dawes attached himself to the pair, and it was a trio that drifted briefly and casually from place to place. As the inspector pointed out figures both notable and notorious to his guest, Dawes occasionally volunteered illuminating bits of information. Frequently he nodded smilingly to men and women, or detached himself to drift briefly among them shaking hands. All in all he conveyed the impression of one well known taking his ease and pleasure among his peers.

"You know your Broadway, Mr. Fleetwell," observed Crandall a shade drily, and Dawes smiled with a self-deprecation which was like a modest acknowledgment of celebrity.

Midnight had passed, and Crandall was masking a yawn, when, in a noisy place where the saxophones blared through drum beat and dancing figures swayed through thick tobacco fog, a man came somewhat hurriedly to the table.

"Inspector," he announced with an immobile face, "You're needed at headquarters. I've been combing Broadway for you." The man spoke in a low tone, and as he bent forward his coat fell back and Muir saw that he wore a badge on his waistcoat.

As Crandall glanced up the other went on:

"Mahaffey's been knocked off. Someone got him on Forty-ninth Street an hour ago. He was found by the man on the beat lying in the doorway of a millinery store."

"Mahaffey?" Crandall's chin blocked itself, and he pushed back his chair very deliberately. "It's beside the point to ask why. He had enemies enough, of course, but I'm wondering why to-night?"

The detective shook his head.

"Search me, Skipper—unless it was because a late edition had a story about him. It said he had a long interview with J. G. Smith and that he was going before the Grand Jury——"

"That's so. I sent him up to Smith's this afternoon. Come on," snapped Crandall bluntly, "let's go!"

Muir's entertainment had been arranged for him by Smith & Welligan and they had left nothing undone for his comfort. The young lawyer, whose sparse circumstances had laid upon him the need of an almost parsimonious economy, had been impressed by their spirit of free-handed liberality. He was appreciative, too, of the nicety of method which took into account his stubborn and sensitive mountain pride, and quick to realize the inadequacy of his ready-made clothes in this altered setting, he had taken sartorial counsel of Smith and at his first leisure had ordered things more suitable.

This morning, when after a few hours of sleep he rose with a clear head but with disquieting memories of an evening that had ended on a climax of murder, he found his new clothes waiting in his room. When

he stood before his glass in his altered guise, he nodded with a certain complacency at his reflection. If he came of backwoods blood it was a sound strain, a strain that neither gawked in unseemly amazement at new sights nor cringed in the company of notables.

Without vanity but with a quiet satisfaction the young lawyer realized that the service he was performing was genuine and that in the generous attitude of his business hosts was no smarting savour of charity. They had bombarded him with vital and exacting questions and his responses had been unhesitating and comprehensive. In short, Muir felt that he was making good, and an old dream which had long stirred in him was now for the first time strong in its hope of fulfilment. It was a dream of a magnificently beautiful but a damnably poverty-pinched country developing into self-support and importance; of a sleeping people awakening to energy and literate self-consciousness. It would be something to have a part in that awakening.

Yet so kaleidoscopic had been the pattern and colour of his shifting impressions and experiences, so like to the fantastic hurry and change of dreams, that his emotions were disquietingly tangled. In his heart an old agony which had subsided into a dulled ache through monotonous years had come afresh to life and poignancy. He had seen Lissy again. He had heard her voice and all the hard schooling of his acquired philosophy had sunk into the futility of a forgotten lesson. Yearnings arose insistently again; yearnings that could come to nothing. She was un-

happy and she would never admit it. He would see her again, and yet that meeting could only pain him.

The meeting with Dawes had shaken him, too. He had taken the hand of an enemy and its touch had scalded him. How whole and unmodified had been his hate he had not until that moment realized. Like a buried Yogi it had lain dormant or semidormant through these years. But last night, back of his steadily schooled and masked features, his eyes had looked through swimming spots of blood lust, and for an instant the boards under his feet had seemed as unsteady as deck timbers of a vessel, buffeted in a sea running high under a destructive gale.

As he turned away from his mirror and opened his door Muir was thinking of all these things, and the personal elements occupied the forefront of his consciousness, but when he picked up his morning paper his self-preoccupation was broken.

On the first page he saw a portrait and before he read the headlines above or the caption below he recognized the straight-gazing hard-bitten face of the old detective who had sat at the table with him, and who had within a few hours lain dead by the hand of an assassin.

The details were meagre and still devoid of any clue as to the identity of the slayers.

Breakfasting lightly and hastily, Muir Bratchell strode uptown and turned in again at the entrance of the Delaware Building which housed the offices of Smith & Welligan.

Acquainted now with those offices and with the

young woman who sat in the reception room, Muir only nodded and Miss Cary glanced up and smiled her recognition.

"Mr. Smith is in Mr. Welligan's office," she told him. "He said you were to go directly into his room. He'll be there in a few minutes."

The anteroom was a spacious cubicle facing on the hall, and only by passing through it could one enter the private offices of the two members of the firm. Other rooms variously used by subordinates of the staffs gave off from this waiting room by other doors, and the suite was designed and furnished with a quiet elegance.

Sitting in the chair opposite that customarily used by Smith, Muir waited, gazing idly through the broad window which stood open to the warm morning air.

The prospect commanded by that window was conducive rather to concentration upon work than to idle gazing, thought the mountain lawyer. The outlook was over a broad inner court so that, though the elevation was that of the twentieth floor, the view was blocked by the blankness of an opposite wall broken only by myriad windows. Looking upward as out of a huge well-pit, one saw the decorative coping of the roof line and blue sky across which there was a fleece of lazy cloud drift.

The door opened and both Welligan and Smith entered.

"Prompt as usual," greeted Smith, but this morning his smile was preoccupied and he held an open newspaper in his hand.

"I've only got one job here in New York," an-

swered Bratchell. "It would be a pity if I couldn't get round to it on time."

Smith nodded. "It's I who am late," he said. "But I have more than one job to-day. I suppose you have seen the newspapers? This man who was murdered last night was working with us. He was with me an hour yesterday afternoon."

Muir nodded. "I ate supper with him," he answered briefly. "Inspector Crandall stood treat to both of us."

"Oh! Then you saw him not long before he died." Smith laid down the paper and took his seat at the table. "However," he went on as, with a resolute effort, he brought his mind back to less tragic concerns, "we will take up other affairs now. We were plotting the line of the railroad into Hemlock County, weren't we?"

The three men had talked for less than ten minutes when Miss Cary opened the door.

"I know you don't want to be interrupted," she began apologetically, "but Inspector Crandall is here —and he says he must see you."

It was almost as if Smith were relieved at an interruption which permitted him to switch his mind back into the channel from which he could not easily wrench its current of preoccupation.

"Bring him in," he directed curtly, and as the young woman slipped out, followed by Welligan, the inspector appeared in the door. His face was unexcited but his shrewd eyes were a trifle narrowed and his firm mouth clamped his short-stemmed pipe with a dogged tightness.

"Well," he began curtly, "your war is on, Mr. Smith. The first gun has been fired and the first casualty is ours."

The lawyer motioned toward a chair.

"Sit down, Crandall," he invited. "So you find a connection between this murder and our investigation? I was afraid of it but I hoped——"

"Maybe I made it too strong, at that," admitted the detective. "I wish we had some direct connection of any sort. So far all we know is that Mahaffey's dead and that it was a pistol job of the usual sort. He was shot from the left and back. He evidently didn't even make an effort to draw. Like as not he never knew."

"Then nothing tangible has developed?"

"Nothing yet. Of course there's been the usual procedure—a throwing out of the dragnet—a rounding up of suspicious characters. So far, that's all."

Smith's eyes were soberly inquiring.

"I know you didn't come in here on a busy day like this just to tell me in person that there is no news. What specific thing brought you?"

"I was up there on Forty-ninth Street and I was passing here. The first thing we have to do is to stop up whatever leak is letting your procedure get to the papers. I've admitted that I don't know yet whether there's any connection between Mahaffey's death and his helping you—but he was here yesterday. A newspaper printed that fact last night and he's dead today."

Smith's face, already grave in its concern, became more troubled.

"I suppose I needn't assure you that I didn't talk for publication."

"No. I know that. I've told you before that I wasn't strong for this type of reform work—and why. Now the thing has burst and we're up to our necks in the same fight. From now on don't chirp to any zealous reformer about any detail. Your lay associates in the pulpit and elsewhere love the ballyhoo too much. It was published that Mahaffey was going before the Grand Jury. Now he won't go, and the gentlemen who talk out of the sides of their mouths may guess what names he would have mentioned there if he hadn't been stopped. If Mahaffey had effective stool pigeons in mind that he didn't name to me—and if those names get whispered in advance, they won't go either. They'll get the works just as he did."

"I understand you. From now on my clients are not in my confidence as to detail. They must give me *carte blanche.*"

"Good—but not good enough. It should have begun earlier. Maybe Mahaffey wouldn't have been wasted."

Smith leaned forward.

"How much of a hurry are you in, Inspector? Mahaffey is silenced, as you say, but he talked to me yesterday. Perhaps I'd better go over our conversation with you."

Crandall chewed on his pipe.

"I'm in as much of a hurry as a man can be, but I want to have a look through your data. I may need it before the Grand Jury does. Let me use your 'phone.

Headquarters must know where to catch me for the next half hour."

Traffic Officer Schneider stood at the intersection of Sixth Avenue and Thirty-ninth Street. A flood tide of motor traffic surged and buffeted north and south, east and west. The patrolman handled it with the nonchalant autocracy acquired by long practice, but just after he had halted the east and west flow with the shrill of his whistle, a rakish roadster driven by an engaging young woman failed to come to a halt, and instantly there ensued the beginnings of a jam. The officer's face grew severe and he hurried to the side of the offending machine while both lines of traffic became necessarily stationary.

"What's the big idea, sister?" he demanded fiercely. "Do you figure that you can vamp your way through my traffic just because you ain't hard to look at?"

"I'm sorry, Officer," she made meek response. "I thought you gave me the hand to turn."

"Is that so! You thought so, did you? Well——"

Patrolman Schneider broke off suddenly and turned his head with his lips still parted.

A coupé driven by a youngish man nattily dressed and hard-eyed had perforce halted against the white line with the west-running flow. He sat with a cigarette drooping from his lips and the hand that rested on the steering wheel flashed with the glint of a sizable diamond.

A sedan pointed north had already made the crossing, drawn to the far curb, and halted. A man had

stepped out. Casually he had strolled over to the rear of the waiting coupé, where he looked from behind through the window at the young man with the diamond ring—and that young man did not see him. The hand of the man on foot flashed swiftly out of a side pocket and a blunt, wicked-looking automatic pistol barked three times so rapidly that its reports seemed blended into a continuous belching of noise. The young man with the diamond ring slumped forward with his chest and face on the wheel and the man outside tossed his pistol through the open window of the coupé. With no seeming of frantic hurry he dodged around another car, gained his own running board, and was away, dodging recklessly through the crowded street with a roaring engine.

It was the raucous outbreak of the triple explosion that cut short the traffic officer's half-humorous bawling out of the comely offender. He jerked around on his heels and scuttled for the point from which the sound had come, but he found himself obstructed by a solid intrenchment of crowding cars. His whistle shrilled desperately in alarm, and machines began disgorging human figures to add to the confusion while the sidewalks spilled their congestion over into the street. Everyone was elbowing and talking in a babel of questions, and no one contributed a definite assertion. Policemen began running from near-by posts, and around the next corner to the north a large car with a license that no eye had registered turned on two wheels and became invisible to those at the theatre of the tragedy.

CHAPTER XIV

As THE buzzer on Smith's desk burred quietly the attorney reached for the instrument, then shoved it forward and said:

"Crandall, it's for you."

The inspector laid down his pipe and took up the transmitter.

"Hello," he responded, "Crandall speaking. What is it now?"

For a few moments he sat swinging one foot from the edge of the desk, nodding as though in reply to his invisible informant, then his voice came deliberately:

"Let me get this straight. You haven't identified the dead man and you haven't got the license number of the other car? He was bumped off in broad daylight at Thirty-ninth Street—and—well, I'll be right down."

He set the telephone on the desk and scowled.

"Another murder. Things are breaking fast," he made grim assertion. "It may be part of the same thing or it may be entirely separate. See you later."

The buzzer sounded again and Crandall, who had turned toward the door, halted abruptly.

"I'd better wait and see if that's for me, too," he said, but after a moment Smith spoke into the transmitter.

"Very good; I'll be there in the morning." Then he turned his head.

"The district attorney's office," he explained. "The D. A. wants to talk to me. I guess, Bratchell, we'll have to lay over mountain development for a day or two. You can take a holiday."

Muir rose.

"I'll keep in touch with you if you don't mind," he said. "I'm a sort of makeshift prosecuting attorney myself, you know, and as much of this business as you can let me watch—well, it may help me later on."

"Sound idea," interjected Crandall from the door, "and since Bratchell is willing, if there's any word you want to pass me that you can't trust to the 'phone, suppose you let him bring it to headquarters. He knows where my place is."

Left to his own devices late that afternoon, and wandering among the milling matinée crowds, Muir found himself at the lobby of the Star Theatre. Last evening he had been following a guide and had paid no attention to localities. Now he paused, arrested by the framed photographs at the front, and picking out the child actor, whose pictured face was so striking a blending of the features of Lissy and those of Dawes.

Fixed into the unmoving record of photography, this blending was more striking than in the changefulness of life, and in it the tall young man saw also the graphic composite of the greatest love and the greatest hate his life had experienced.

The matinée crowd coming out of the open doors flowed about him, but it had dwindled to the last strag-

glers while he still stood by the portrait racks with thoughts so deeply preoccupied and so personal that he was no more alone when the lobby had emptied than he had been while it was full.

He was called back to externals by realizing a second and smaller hegira trickling from the side passageway of the theatre, and these last to leave, he surmised, must be members of the cast.

It was just as that realization came to him that the two figures whom he knew appeared; Felicity and her boy. Lissy looked worn and tired, and a lesser partisanship than his would have confessed that she could no longer be justly acclaimed as "the comeliest gal on seven creeks." But to Muir the stamp of vicissitude served only to canonize her.

Felicity saw him almost as soon as he saw her, and smiled as she came up.

"Dawes said he showed you something of Broadway last night," she began. "Did you like it?"

"Dawes?" The man's forehead puckered in perplexity for a moment. He had regarded Dawes as a purely accidental and superfluous member of the party but he was, by nature, guarded of speech and he answered slowly:

"All new things interest me more or less. I've seen so little. For a regular thing I'd like Broadway about as well as bone-break fever."

She shot a covertly inquiring glance at him as she went on:

"I hope you didn't let Dawes weary you out. He doesn't realize that some folks like to sleep at night. He said he felt he had to show you all he could."

"No." Muir kept his tone matter-of-fact. "I slept enough."

It was clear enough to him that the "smart rascal" had used him as an alibi with his wife and had dramatized the pretended entertainment of a visitor to build up a scene in which Dawes himself shone with importance. The young lawyer knew the truth now. Lissy was thoroughly disillusioned and wretched. The bright idol she had followed so far from home held no longer the glamour that had once blinded her. But Muir divined, too, that this was a bleak truth which she would never confess to another, and which she would go on vainly denying to herself. Because of the boy about whom her life had its whole orbit, she would not bring her tarnished and threadbare realization of the father out into open admission.

They were still standing by the theatre, and now Muir spoke seriously:

"Lissy," he said, "I wasn't waylaying you here. I just happened by and I stopped to look at Cawdon's pictures. But now since I am here, can I walk along with you? It's been a long time since I've seen you."

She nodded, and her voice was wistful.

"I'm craving to hear news from back home. I used to get letters—at first—but—they don't come any more. I've been away so long."

"And you don't love this town overmuch, do you, Lissy?"

She shook her head and her lips drooped.

"Sometimes I think I'd give my right arm to stand on some bald knob back home and look off across the

valley by moonlight. Here folks don't even know when it fulls or wanes."

The man looked at the boy who had pranced on ahead.

"I guess the little shaver doesn't scarcely remember what it sounds like when the frogs tune up along the creek beds, does he?"

There was a tang of bitterness and rebellion in her tone for all its restraint.

"He knows more about saxophones and the 'effects' the trap drummer gets with his cymbals and triangle and the like."

Muir nodded, then raised his eyes soberly to hers.

"How keen are you about bringing him up around a theatre, Lissy? Don't it kind of kill the childhood out of him?"

"Look!" she exclaimed, as she nodded toward two girls of about ten standing by a shop window. They were children wholly devoid of childishness; elaborately dressed and heavily rouged; human dolls as artificial as things made of bisque, as calculatedly affected as demi-mondaines in miniature.

"Those are stage children, too," Lissy told him. "That's what it does to them—sometimes."

Muir pitched his reply in a matter-of-fact tone. Both of them were talking in repressions, each distrustful of overcharged and curbed emotions.

"Of course boys are different, but I should think one actor in the family would be enough."

For a moment Lissy was caught off her guard. The rare experience of talking with someone who spoke her own language after so long an exile among

strangers, who always remained strangers, was breaking down her studied reticence. She found herself declaring ironically as though thinking aloud.

"They don't call themselves actors. They are all artists—and one *is* enough in a family—but there's got to be one that's working."

Instantly she realized that she was tacitly accusing Cawdon's father to an old enemy, and her cheeks coloured hotly with mortification.

"Dawes," she hurriedly explained, "has made a reputation. He can't afford to take parts unless they suit him—and that kind is hard to get."

"I see," assented Muir, "or rather I reckon I would see if I understood these things. Dawes looked mighty prosperous to me."

"He can't afford to look different," she assured him. "It's a game where you have to make a front. You asked me if I liked to have Cawdon brought up in this life. I hate it, but I expect that's because I'm not an artist. Everybody says he has real talent and I haven't any right to stand between him and his gifts. I just try to keep him natural and unspoiled the best I can."

"I reckon, Lissy," he assured her, "that's all you can do—and, like as not, it's enough. He'll be a famous man some day and he'll owe a heap to you."

They were merely exchanging words and not saying the things they meant, or at any rate, the things they most deeply meant. Warily as fencers they were avoiding betrayal into the expression of their deeper emotions. The man knew that his old love had never been conquered and must never be declared. The

woman half knew, and pretended not to know, that she was seeing again in its true and long-forgotten values the character which had once been the centre of her heart's picture. That picture had been dimmed by another, another that had seemed stronger, brighter, more distracting. She had chosen and was paying for her choice.

The price was disillusionment. What she had done was to reject the genuine and accept the counterfeit. But that she must not acknowledge. At the door of the boarding house they shook hands gravely and separated with commonplaces of leave taking.

To himself as he trudged along alone, Muir was saying bitter things.

"He stole her away from me—and he's ruining her life," he declared silently. "I oughtn't to have suffered myself to be gainsaid. I ought to have killed him—back there before it was too late."

When Muir arrived at headquarters before ten o'clock the next morning and asked for Crandall he was promptly passed into the inspector's office. He did not take a chair since he knew that time was crowded, but delivered his message standing, and turned immediately to go.

"Mr. Smith is with the district attorney," he said, "and as soon as he leaves there he's coming here. He's anxious for a few words with you this morning."

"And I want a few with him."

The detective's face was that of a man who was saved from frenzies of stampeding haste only by his

sure philosophy of patience. Now he found leisure to add heartily:

"Don't go, Bratchell, unless you're in a hurry. I'm on my way to the line-up and it may interest you to come along. We've had the dragnet working and there will be a reception of crooks this morning. So far as I know we've caught nothing worth while." He paused and began running with a sure haste through a sheaf of reports; then he tossed them into a wire rack and pushed back his chair. "You'd better wear a mask," he added, as they left the room. "I hope you don't mind?"

"I'll do as I'm bid," replied the visitor, "but I like to ask questions. Why do I disguise?"

Crandall grinned.

"It's the way we do things. Suspects are brought in and given the eye by our men. Naturally enough we are there to see and not to be seen, so we do our rude staring through peep-holes."

"Yes, I can understand that, but I'm not a detective."

Crandall reached into his side pocket for his blunt pipe, and once more he grinned.

"One of those birds of prey might flatter you by thinking you were a dick," he enlightened tersely, "and just now I'm satisfied with my full line of murders. I'm not hollering for more."

To the mountain lawyer there was grim and novel drama in the line of masked men who stood silent and attentive, as one by one the human fish caught in one night's seining were brought before them and posed

for inspection. They were required to present full face, profile, three-quarter view. Sometimes a black-masked officer would reach out and tilt a chin or studiously touch a scar. Some of the underworld derelicts met the ordeal as indifferently as philosophic voyagers may tolerate the annoyance of a customs inspection. Others were insolently bold, defiantly hard, or palpably nervous, each according to his caste and kind.

When the last of the group had been passed back, the masks came off and the faces of the detectives resumed their individuality. Then Muir found himself among men who seemed on the whole more nervously apprehensive than the victims who had just paraded before them. Their eyes turned anxiously on the one man who had remained seated and unmasked throughout the proceedings and who still sat noncommittally but frowningly silent.

When the commissioner of police honoured one of these routine meetings with his presence there was apt to be a reason. When his attendance followed closely on the heels of two particularly outrageous murders in neither of which had there been any appreciable progress toward solution his words must be anxiously awaited. And back of those two recent assassinations lay the unlifted shadow of the Archibald mystery.

Crandall alone appeared tranquil, as he filled his pipe and rammed down the tobacco with his pencil end.

"I haven't asked the commissioner why he is here this morning," he began, and at his tone the group shifted and fidgeted uneasily. "But I have my

guess. I imagine he's here to bawl us out for a bunch of dumb dicks that are drawing salaries under false pretenses. If I were in his place I'd be doing just that thing. Before I try to answer him, I'm going to let you answer me—if you can."

There was an uncomfortable silence which the inspector permitted to stretch into tenseness before he continued:

"It's been weeks since Archibald was killed. Night before last one detective, who wasn't a dumb dick, was given the works, and we have done nothing about it. Yesterday an unknown man driving a flashy car was shot to death just off Broadway in the middle of traffic—we have done nothing about it. That body has lain unidentified in the morgue from that time to this. You men have been working on those cases, if it can be called working. The commissioner has every right to ask me what I'm here for—and I'm asking you. I'm not passing the buck, but if I can't get results with you men, then you and I both ought to get the air. That's the situation in a nutshell. Farraday, can you offer us any enlightenment?"

The inspector had been speaking evenly and quietly but his eyes were agate. His men knew him and Farraday began his response in a disconcerted voice.

"Nobody on the Broadway squad can recognize the dead man and no one has called to claim his body at the morgue. There wasn't a thing on him to identify him by, although he had a roll of jack in his kick as thick as a balloon tire. Even the tailor's tag was cut out of his coat. There ain't no finger prints of him on file."

Detective Farraday paused and looked appealingly at his chief, but Crandall vouchsafed him no encouragement, and he took up his narrative afresh.

"The license plate was that of a car stolen last week in Flushing, but that don't get us anywhere. We ain't been loafing, Skipper, but we ain't turned up any identification yet. This bird must be some out-of-town gun."

"Some out-of-town gun!" Crandall's voice snapped like a bull whip. "Some unimportant dip, perhaps, with a roll on him that would have choked Jonah's whale, with ice worth a grand on his fingers and in his necktie. You aren't as dumb as that, Farraday. A man that needs killing bad enough to get the works near midday a stone's throw from Longacre Square is right important—to somebody. He belongs in the *Who's Who of Crookdom* all right. Whoever pulled this job knew more of the police than the police seem to know of them. Kelly, you're a Broadway squadder. How about it?"

"I thought I knew the run of 'em, Skipper, but this is a new one on me. If he'd dropped from the moon he couldn't be a more complete stranger."

Crandall snapped up his head and bit hard on his pipe stem.

"I'm responsible to the commissioner and the public for the personnel and results of this department," he made bluntly categorical assertion, "and by the same token, you fellows are responsible to me. Why the hell doesn't the Broadway squad know its Broadway? You're supposed to have a line on important crooks. You're supposed to have a liaison with your

tipsters, aren't you? Here's a gun who was important, so important that they couldn't let him live. What was his racket? Who were his mob? Who were his enemies? What was their motive? It would seem that the only man in my outfit that knew his elbow from his ear was Mahaffey, and he's dead. I'm not going to insult you men. I'm not going to intimate that you're afraid of getting what Mahaffey got, but get out of here and step on it. Turn in some results. Otherwise, I'm going to recommend to the commissioner that he reorganize the force from the top down, starting with me and ending with you. Now go to it!"

CHAPTER XV

THE room emptied itself except for the commissioner, the inspector, and Muir Bratchell, and there was a brief silence broken by the police head who had not spoken until now.

"So, Inspector, you are still all at sea?"

Crandall nodded grimly.

"Entirely so. As a matter of fact, I'm not blaming the men as much as I seemed to be. This job is up to me, of course, and I haven't got much to show you." He turned toward Muir.

"Bratchell," he said thoughtfully, "you're sitting in on inside stuff with a fresh viewpoint. I've heard how you do your stuff in Kentucky. If you knew the town I think I could use you."

"But I don't know the town. I'm a hill-billy from the backwoods."

"I was just thinking. Your friend Dawes Fleetwell——"

Muir's eyes snapped darkly.

"He's no friend of mine, Mr. Crandall."

"My mistake. I thought for a moment when you met backstage I might have to get between the two of you. None the less, he struck me as shrewd, and he does seem to know his Broadway. He might even know who this dead man is."

"He might," admitted Bratchell. "Why don't you

ask him. He won't lie to you unless it's to his profit."

Crandall touched a buzzer and when the door opened gave brief instruction. "If Captain Foley is in the building ask him to step in here for a moment. Tell him the commissioner is here."

The police captain arrived promptly and Crandall put his inquiry without preamble.

"Captain, do you remember a man who used to do an act with revolvers in vaudeville? He gave an exhibition at one of the police picnics—a fellow by the name of Dawes Fleetwell?"

Foley nodded his affirmation.

"Sure I remember him. He had stuff that I've never seen beaten," came the slow response. "What he used in his act was mostly trick business, quick draw and spatter-work, but in actual marksmanship he was a wizard, too. I've run into him now and then since."

"He hangs around Broadway and knows the regulars, doesn't he? He might have run into casual newcomers on the fringe of things, mightn't he?—newcomers that our boys haven't checked up on yet?"

"He might, yes. He seems to be a pretty keen sort of lad, not much on hard work, I should say, and swelled in the head, but clever."

"Vaudeville actor, isn't he?"

"Calls himself that, but he's generally out of a job. I take it that as an actor he's a good gambler; free spender when he has it and fond of the bright lights; plays around with pugs and bookmakers and, unless I miss my guess, is a bit of a woman chaser. Last summer he worked with verbalists around the race tracks and picked up some jack. He might not be

communicative, though. Sports don't like to be called squealers, you know."

"All I want to ask him is whether he ever saw this dead man. He's never had any sort of run-in with the police, has he?"

"Never. His record is clear."

When the uniformed officer had closed the door behind him Crandall turned again to the commissioner.

"Now, sir," he said as he refilled his pipe, "I'm ready to take what I expect you came here to give me—a damn good bawling out. If I went right ahead and kept you waiting, it's because things have to get started and a cop can be fired any time."

The commissioner smiled noncommittally.

"I don't know that I have anything to say just now after all, Crandall," he responded, "except to make one suggestion."

"And that is?"

"As to this investigation that Smith & Welligan are conducting. We mustn't forget that. The papers are ballyhooing it. In a fashion, all outside intervention of that sort is a tacit reflection on the police. For that very reason we must lean backward in coöperating. It's particularly unfortunate that this sudden upflaring of crime comes just now—starting with Archibald and ending with this thing on Thirty-ninth Street."

"Do you think that's mere coincidence, Chief?"

The commissioner looked up with momentary surprise in his expression.

"Do you mean you think these last *two* murders grow out of that crusade?"

"I mean that the chief question is whether they do or not, and that until we can answer that we can't make a true start."

"Then if the underworld is taking that crusade seriously, instead of laughing at it——"

Crandall sat down and refilled his pipe.

"Day before yesterday," he said, "I told Mr. Smith that his enterprise was giving the crooks a good laugh. To-day I doubt it. Since then the most reliable man I had has been knocked off and a mysterious stranger who can't be identified has been done in with the most melodramatic trimmings. Those developments have to be taken into account in appraising the seriousness of Smith's crusade. It's the criminals who know best what they have to fear."

"But if Smith has such damaging and definite facts that his informers must be hushed up with death those facts are at our disposal."

"If it were as simple as that I wouldn't be sweating over the job as I am."

"Then what do you mean?"

Crandall puffed deliberately on his pipe and turned toward Muir.

"Mr. Bratchell here," he suggested, "is a prosecuting attorney from Kentucky. What would your answer be to the commissioner's last question, Mr. Bratchell?"

Muir drew his brows thoughtfully.

"I reckon you're getting beyond my depth," he made modest assertion. "But maybe Mr. Smith hasn't

got the information these criminals think he's got—not yet. Maybe he was just on the edge of getting it—and they went to work to shut up certain people in time—before they talked."

Crandall nodded.

"That's what's been itching in my mind and if we assume that there's a connection between Mahaffey's talking to Smith and his being killed, it's worth considering. It would indicate that some pretty damaging evidence was just about to fall into Smith's hands—presumably evidence about Archibald."

The commissioner drew his brows thoughtfully, then put a blunt question:

"But if Mahaffey talked fully with Smith he would at least have foreshadowed what he hoped to unearth and from whom he hoped to get his facts."

Again the detective turned to the mountain man.

"Mr. Prosecuting Attorney," he demanded, "how would you answer that?"

"I'd say," Muir spoke slowly, "that it might be that Mahaffey got his damaging facts between the time he left Mr. Smith's office and the time he was shot, and I'd say that whoever killed him knew just what he got and when and how he got it, and then didn't squander his time."

"And the second murder?" demanded the commissioner.

"Let's take one step at a time, Chief," suggested Crandall. "A kid's got to crawl before he walks." He paused and looked at his pipe bowl as a crystal gazer might study his globe. "I've been checking up on the

movements of Mahaffey pretty closely," he added at last, "but his trail grows cold from an hour after he left Mr. Bratchell and myself, before eight o'clock, and the time, after midnight, when we heard of his death. That's over three hours."

Little Cawdon had gone to school later than ordinary children since he worked at night, and with the clock standing well past eleven his father still lay abed. Dawes always spoke boastfully of his young son whose stage work had elicited more authentic praise than had that of his handsome father. Yet, save for that incontrovertible evidence, Dawes would not have been so expressive of his pride for this small boy whom, it must be said in all honesty, he did not understand.

Unlike himself, little Cawdon had developed a vein of quiet and earnest seriousness which in mountain parlance he had not "heired" from his father. His interest in his schoolbooks seemed deeper rooted than his concern for his "career." As yet there had developed no manifestation of the personal vanity which is so inherent to this world of make-believe and artificial values. He seemed oblivious to that attentive interest of audiences which can be felt across the bright boundary of the footlights, and this could not be wholly charged up to childish naïveté because other children, less acknowledged, failed to display the same immunity. He rehearsed and performed with an uncomplaining application and an instinctive surety of art, but he did it rather with the obedience of a per-

forming dog than with the relish of an actor to whom the silence of inheld breath and the outburst of clapping palms are like draughts of intoxicating wine.

Now Felicity, sitting in the room where Dawes still slept, was looking with an apathetic interest over a morning paper. Her eye fell on a cartoon which shot a barbed shaft at child labour in the cotton mills of the South. It showed peaked and emaciated children gazing out through a mill window across a near-by golf course. Under it went the withering lines:

> The golf links lie so near the mill that almost every day
> The little children, as they work, can watch the grown men play.

There was a gasp in Lissy's throat and her eyes momentarily blazed as they went across to the man who lay abed. It was all right to speak of art; to look ahead to wealth and fame for the little boy who had been born of love in the far and isolated Kentucky hills. But to her there was an analogy between his life and the irony of that cartoon, and had Dawes's senses been keenly attuned to the subtleties of telepathy he might have stirred uneasily in his forenoon sleep. He might have divined the fermenting of rebellion in the heart of his wife, dangerously close to a Valkyr eruption. He might have known that for the first time, to herself and without concealment, she was admitting her full mistake. She was taking an inventory of her mad reshaping of life there at the back-country camp meeting where a hysterical crowd swayed to the hypnotic spell of zealous evangelists, and where she herself had yielded to as impetuous an exhortation.

She paid little attention to the jangle of the door bell which went with a rasping noisiness through the house, even as far aloft as her hall bedroom, but the sound must have awakened Dawes out of the last of his sleep, for he drew back the covers and flung himself from his bed. Though he had seemed heavily and torpidly unconscious, he now arose and slipped an elaborate dressing gown about him with the same clear-eyed alertness with which he had formerly greeted the freshness of dawn in the distilled air of the hills.

As he was about to open the door to go along the narrow hall to the bathroom there was a rapping on the outside, and the frowzy landlady called through the panels, "There's a cop coming up. He wants to see Mr. Fleetwell."

The tone was surly. Mrs. Schaefer was a disillusioned entertainer of such guests as did not always contribute to an optimistic faith in humanity. There had even been those who had left her establishment for jails, and left without full settlement. She was as sensitive for the good name of her house as one is apt to be of a reputation which is not too secure.

Felicity caught herself exclaiming with a catch of fright in her voice, "A policeman!" and the man scowled for a moment, but only as one may scowl with the irritation of being interrupted by a caller on the verge of his bath and before he has breakfasted.

"Tell him I'll be down," he gave response, and the voice of Mrs. Schaefer was as bleak as her words were brief.

"I said he was comin' up, didn't I?"

For the moment Felicity forgot the resentment that had flared a moment before in her bosom against this husband with so much personality and so little steadfastness. The prime instinct of mountain blood is a cohesion to family which obliterates inner dissensions at the first whisper of outside attack.

"A policeman," she whispered. "What can he want with you, Dawes?"

The man turned, and his white teeth flashed in an unconcerned smile.

"He hasn't confided in me yet," he reminded her airily. "But I've friends on the force—as elsewhere."

"Then it's not—not anything——"

"Do I look like a harried and hunted man?" he inquired blandly. "The cops haven't got anything on me, if that's what you mean."

There was a heavier rapping then and the door opened on a uniformed officer.

"Hello, Big Boy," accosted Dawes. "What the devil do you want before a man has finished his beauty sleep?"

"Beauty sleep, is it? Myself I've been on the beat for hours. Inspector Crandall wants to see you down at headquarters."

"Righto! What does he want?"

"Ask him when you get there. It's not me he sent for, and it's not me he's tellin'. He said to ask you to get down as soon as you can. So step on it, fella."

As the officer turned to stamp down the creaking stairs, Felicity again made anxious inquiry.

"What on earth can he want, Dawes?"

"Once more I remind you that the interview is still

in the future." Then amiably her husband smiled at her. "Use your head, Lissy. If it were a pinch he'd be sending an escort for me. As a matter of fact, I had supper with Crandall the night Mahaffey was killed. He's a personal friend of mine."

A half hour later, jauntily swinging his stick, Dawes was ushered into the room where Crandall sat with Muir Bratchell.

For just an instant a film of hardness crossed the eyes of the newcomer as he recognized the presence of his old enemy, but it passed so fleetingly that it was marked only by Muir himself.

"You sent for me, Inspector." Fleetwell stood with his hat tilted at a somewhat rakish angle and his eyes smilingly self-possessed.

Crandall nodded and took the pipe from his teeth.

"The other night when I met you I commented that you seemed to know your Broadway, Mr. Fleetwell."

"I can find my way about when the lights are on."

"That's often enough." Crandall spoke drily. "What I'm after is information. I want to know if you can identify the man who was shot in his car on Sixth Avenue yesterday."

"I haven't seen him."

"No. I want you to go to the morgue with me now."

Dawes nodded. "It's my idea of no place to go before breakfast, but I'm at your service. Lead on, McDuff."

A half hour later Crandall, Muir, and the actor turned away from the dreary place of death and Dawes was shaking his head.

"I never met him to know him. I couldn't swear I'd

ever seen him in life—and yet I've got the feeling of remembering that face. It seems to me I saw it somewhere and not long ago."

"I imagine," suggested the inspector, as Dawes went swinging along the street, "that by the time we get to my office Mr. Smith will be waiting for us, and if he's as busy as I am to-day, he won't relish long delays."

They found that the attorney had arrived at Centre Street ahead of them, and he went at once with Crandall into the inspector's office. Muir offered to drop out of the group at the threshold, but Crandall laid a hand on his arm.

"You're still with us, Bratchell," he suggested, "unless Mr. Smith wants to see me alone."

"By all means come in, Bratchell," urged Smith. "You're a charter member of our none-too-triumphant coterie."

Crandall reached for his pipe when he had closed the door and the lawyer stood with back to the window as he began speaking.

"The district attorney sent for me," he said. "I don't yet quite know why. He already knew all I had to tell him, and he had nothing new to confide in me. About all I got from him was a general sense of dissatisfaction at the entire failure of the law's machinery to function up to date."

The inspector nodded. "I suppose he paid his compliments to the police?"

"He said the department had given him nothing to get his teeth into as yet."

"This department has very little to get its own teeth into—as yet, but how about his own staff? He has a homicide bureau of his own. Have they evolved any theory which has escaped our less gifted senses?"

Smith smiled faintly in negation.

"The D. A. mentioned some things which he thought might have been accomplished by this time and made the somewhat obvious comment that they had not been accomplished."

Crandall puffed contemplatively on his pipe.

"I wonder if I can guess them," he mused. "Did he suggest that we might have been able to follow Mahaffey's movements more accurately?"

"Yes. That was his first complaint."

"In other words, every operative working on a case should have other operatives working on him, just as fleas have other fleas to bite 'em," the observation was drily made. "Unfortunately, we lack the man-power for that. Then did he also suggest that we should know who the young woman was whose car caused the traffic jam?"

"You are following his trend very accurately—almost step by step."

"I'm only treading the beaten path of the obvious," commented the inspector. "It seems fashionable to assume that the police have neglected the rudiments. I've had Schneider before me and talked to him pretty straight. He failed to get the license number of the young woman's car because he was interrupted before he reached that point, and rushed off in pursuit of bigger game. Had he been a quicker-minded chap he

might have thought of everything at once. It was his misfortune but not his fault that he was just an average cop."

"Do you assume," asked Smith, "that the girl was actually implicated?"

"You have to assume everything long enough to consider its possibilities. Certainly she should be checked up on. It's quite apparent that for the success of the murder plan and the getaway of the killers, a traffic jam was essential. She afforded it, and she has showed us a clean pair of heels. Schneider says he would know her if he saw her again, but he has only to sort over six million people to do that, provided, of course, she is still in town."

"As to Mahaffey——"

"As to Mahaffey, I have been working every lead I could think of from the first. I know his routine but it seems he was doing some free-lancing on his own that evening and he disappeared from view only to reappear dead. Of course he gave you no intimation of any plans he had. We've been over all that."

"Quite correct, yet that's why I made an appointment with you this morning. Mahaffey conveyed a distinct impression, and that impression has been growing on me since—that he hoped by the next day to have gotten hold of something quite definite. As a matter of fact, I was a little miffed at his seeming unwillingness to confide in me more fully as to his own ideas—whatever they were."

Crandall shook his head and sent out a cloud of smoke.

"Whatever was on his mind was still tentative,

probably nebulous, when we saw him last. He might have held back something in his talk with you, but if it had been tangible at all he would have told me."

"Then there's no reason for my taking up your time any further, Inspector. By the way, the D. A. did tell me one thing which I see no reason to withhold from you. He seemed dissatisfied with Lieutenant Rossi. He even intimated that he thought the commissioner might advantageously shift him to a less important precinct."

Again Crandall nodded.

"Rossi would naturally come in for criticism. He's a logical goat," he reflected, "because he is in command at the district station most directly concerned, and because he has brought in no results. But in greater or lesser degree the same thing applies to all of us. Possibly we shall move faster when we've heard from Chicago and other towns. The unknown man's photograph and finger prints, taken after death, have been broadcast, of course."

After a moment's pause the inspector looked up. "Between ourselves," he admitted, "the commissioner has thought of transferring Rossi to an outlying district. Perhaps a keener man is needed to deal with tenderloin conditions, and possibly Rossi has been there too long. A man is apt to grow a little lax, yet he's not a fool, and he knows that part of town. You can see now how, when a thing like this gets stirred up, the hue and cry is all for swapping horses in midstream, and that's not so good."

CHAPTER XVI

AFTER some minutes of discussion Smith took up his hat, and then he turned toward Muir.

"Mr. Bratchell," he said, "I'm afraid the matters you came here for are doomed to interruption. If it fits in with your other plans we want you to mark time for a while and wait for us. However, if you can't afford the delay, you might go home and come back to us later on."

Muir met the steady eyes of the attorney and answered thoughtfully:

"That's for you to say, Mr. Smith. I'm in no tormentin' haste, but yet I don't want to tarry on here at your expense needlessly, only——"

"Only what, Bratchell?"

The hillsman's eyes were sober.

"Only it might be heedful for me to get through with whatever I've undertaken here before I leave. I mightn't contrive to get back."

"You mean——?"

"Our ways are different down home," said the mountaineer. "But you've seen what sometimes happens to marked men. I've been marked down myself, you know."

Under the high pressure of more immediate violences Smith had forgotten that. Now he answered in a voice which was calculatedly matter-of-fact.

"Naturally, I'd rather have you stay on, if you aren't prejudicing your own interests. Good-morning, Inspector."

"If you're going back to your office," suggested Crandall, rising, "you might give us a lift that far. I've a notion to run up for a little chat with Rossi. Bratchell hasn't seen a district police station yet. He might as well add that to his collection of New York experiences."

It was Smith's town car which, after leaving him at his office building, took the others on and set them down at the curb before a police station in the upper forties.

Muir followed his guide through the desk sergeant's room, past the cell-block, and into the lieutenant's office, where Rossi swung himself around in a swivel chair and nodded his head. He was a dark man with handsome and strongly Italian features, and for a while the two police officers threshed over the scant developments of their murder cases, attacking the problem from this and that angle of conjecture.

"This business hits me hard," Rossi made morose declaration at the end. "I've got a good district here and every loot in the department wants to ease himself into it. They've all got their axes out for me, and if I don't turn something up pretty soon, it looks dirty weather ahead. I'll be getting shipped out to some dump around Far Rockaway." He sighed despondently, and added: "I wish we could locate that dame that threw her pile of junk into the traffic."

"We may all get the air, Rossi," answered Crandall amiably. "The detective bureau isn't showing up

too brilliantly, either. I'm stabbing at long-shot chances myself. For instance, I took a man named Dawes Fleetwell over to look at the dead man this morning. He tells me he knows you."

Rossi nodded abstractedly. "Did he help you any? He's a sharp lad with a keen eye in his head. No, he couldn't identify? Well, as far as that goes, no one seems able to. Looks like this guy just came to New York out of nowhere to die on our hands." He sighed and drummed nervously with his fingers on his desk top.

"Fleetwell," he commenced after a moment, "drops in here now and then. I met him first when he was doing fancy shooting stuff at the police picnic. Sometimes he unlimbers his banjo for the boys in the squad room and sings these backwoods ballads. He's a card, that lad. I might have thought to try and have him identify this body myself—but I didn't."

"He's as down-in-the-mouth and as up-in-the-air as the rest of us," was Crandall's observation on his colleague as the two left the station house, and a few minutes later Muir separated from the inspector and went his own way. The killing of time was not difficult for one who, after a life of little travel and an appetite whetted on much reading, found himself at the focus of such diverse interests. In the novitiate years of waiting for clients in the dingy office which looked out over the muddy streets of Peril Town, where razor-backed hogs wallowed and grunted in the mud puddles, there had been time to kill.

Hours had been left from the law books for dipping into such other volumes as were to be found in the

miscellany of Judge Fosdick's library, and through these hours of vicariously viewing a world which lay beckoning beyond the timbered barriers, New York had always loomed as an unattainable beacon. Now he was at its centre, and it presented to his senses an embarrassment of riches.

He planned to drop into Smith's office again late in the afternoon and inquire if he were needed in his new rôle of liaison officer between upper Fifth Avenue and Centre Street, and after some random sightseeing he went back to his hotel for a bath and a half hour in the airy room whose windows gave off over Jefferson Market and Greenwich Avenue.

There was a letter in his box postmarked Peril Town, and he recognized the handwriting of Judge Cullom, who had presided over the Featherstone trial:

There has been a good bit of talk about you [wrote the judge]. I thought I had better let you have the news in advance so that you might be forewarned, and exercise due caution when you come home. The gossip runs that you'll get what Fosdick got. I don't want to seem an alarmist, and I know that you aren't easy to scare, but I also know that in our mountain parts such threats aren't always empty. The Featherstones seemed to nurse the conviction to their hearts that when my old friend Fosdick fell his successor would take warning and watch his step. They assumed that you would prosecute with a half-hearted formality and eschew actual vigour. As a matter of fact, you gave them a double-fisted fight from start to finish. Now the Featherstones are visiting their undiluted hatred on you—and they are good haters. The talk goes that Red Bill is already exerting strong influences looking toward a pardon, and that his declared intention when, and if, he gets out, is to kill you. But besides that it's currently rumoured that

his kinsmen won't bide their time even that long. You are a young man with a hopeful future, and the enemies you have made do you great honour, but when you come home it behooves you to walk warily and take no foolhardy chances. I have written thus lengthily because all the distractions of your visit to the great city (which I have never seen and suppose now I shall never see) might dim your sense of jeopardy and cause you to relax your vigilance. Don't do it. Be on your guard and be armed.

Muir thrust the letter into his pocket and began stripping for his bath. An hour and a half later he turned into the office building on upper Fifth Avenue, and there, just emerging from an elevator, he saw Dawes Fleetwell with a banjo case in his hand.

Muir's eyes met those of his old enemy, and with a curt nod he started toward an express elevator which stood open, but Dawes raised a detaining hand and smiled.

"This makes twice we have met by chance on the same day," he commented amiably, as he came over, "and we are probably the only two men from our neck of the woods among these millions of people. Do you know somebody in this building?"

"Smith & Welligan have their offices here," Muir told him briefly. "They brought me to New York, and I'm in and out several times a day."

"I see. I come in here frequently myself," Dawes pointed to the directory board and indicated a name with an outstretched forefinger, Heimstein and Brophy, Theatrical Bookings, 301–305.

"That's one of the best known agencies in town," he announced airily. "I'm dickering through them

with prominent vaudeville people as to my next engagement. I know where we might get a drink if——"

"I'm obleeged," declined Muir shortly, reverting to boyhood verbiage. "I reckon I can't hardly spare the time. I've got to see Mr. Smith," and turning into an elevator, he was whisked upward.

Miss Cary said, "I think Mr. Smith is on the 'phone. Please wait a moment." Then she went to the office door and, coming back, motioned him in.

Smith was sitting at his desk and holding the 'phone receiver to his ear.

"This is J. G. Smith speaking." His words came with a staccato crispness. "You just gave me a call. I want it traced. I want to know where it came from, and I'll be here just five minutes. Please hurry."

"If you're just going out," said Muir, "I won't stay. I only came in to ask if you wanted me."

"I do want you." The lawyer's lean face was kindled with a freshly stirred interest. "I want you to get in touch with Crandall later on. I've just had an extraordinary message. A woman's voice has made an appointment with me for to-night. I don't know who it is except that she says I may know her as Mary Doe, which isn't her name. She volunteers to give me what she says is vital information."

Muir's eyes narrowed.

"I reckon you don't need advice from me, Mr. Smith, but I'm a sort of a criminal lawyer, and until here of late you haven't dealt much with murderers. You'd better not see people you don't know just now without having a witness along and a bodyguard would be better still."

The attorney smiled.

"That's what I imagine Crandall would tell me, too; however, this mysterious person is a woman. She is coming to my house on Long Island to-night and says she's coming alone. She insists that she will not speak to anyone else, and not even to me unless it's in strict privacy. Wait a moment—there's the 'phone. . . . Hello. Yes, this is Smith speaking. . . . You say it was from a public pay booth. . . . Where? . . . In Trasker's Drug Store at Times Square? . . . All right. Thank you. . . ."

The receiver clicked on its hook, and Smith was speaking to Muir again.

"Now, Bratchell, listen closely and repeat what I tell you to Crandall sometime this evening. It's just possible that I'm getting something valuable here. It seems quite certain that whoever talked to me is labouring under tense emotional strain. The woman is frightened and won't keep the appointment if I don't accept her condition of the utmost secrecy. She had just called when you arrived. A young woman, I should guess, with a clear and rather pleasant enunciation, but agitated."

Muir was listening attentively as he would have listened to a witness whose utterances he was marking indelibly on his memory, and Smith continued:

"She began with the announcement:

" 'You don't know me, but I must talk to you alone.'

"I said:

" 'What about and when and why the profound secrecy?'

"She replied:

" 'About things you are vitally interested in. I know that all three of the matters you are investigating were attended to by the same person . . . does that mean anything to you?' "

The lawyer paused in his recital, then went rapidly on:

"I answered her:

" 'It may mean a great deal to me, if we're thinking of the same matters. Can I see you immediately at my office?'

"Her reply was almost gasped:

" 'No, not now and certainly not there. I tell you I'm taking a terrible chance as it is. I can't explain. You mustn't keep me here asking questions. You've got to trust me or I can't talk to you at all.'

"Then I tried to calm her by inquiring quietly:

" 'What is your suggestion?' and she said:

" 'I know where you live. I will come to your house sometime to-night. It will be near midnight and I will be alone. I'm a woman. I can't hurt you and I *can* help you. It's that or nothing.' "

"Was that all?" inquired Muir, and the older lawyer nodded:

"That's all except that she hung up. I haven't time to consult with Crandall now. I have an appointment that I can't break, even for this business. I'm dining in town and shall go home afterward. Perhaps to-morrow morning I may have the key to something worth while—perhaps not, but if Crandall can come here to-morrow morning at nine-thirty it will expedite matters."

For the first time since he had been thrown into contact with metropolitan police affairs, Muir Bratchell failed to establish ready touch with the inspector. Crandall could usually be reached through headquarters, but to-night he was absent and Muir was told that he must either talk with someone else on Centre Street or wait—perhaps until midnight. Muir declined to transmit his message through any assistant and, leaving his telephone number, went back to his hotel to wait with what patience he could muster. Familiar enough with threats of violence, he was none the less strangely disturbed. Here the processes of crime functioned with such variance from those which had fallen under his past observation that he felt unaccustomed forebodings, and found it difficult to keep his attention fixed on his newspaper as he listened expectantly for the telephone.

It was well after midnight when it jingled and Crandall's voice came from the hotel lobby with the terse announcement that he was on his way up.

The inspector's manner was as balanced and unperturbed as usual as he nodded in the door, but he came to the point without preamble.

"They told me you were anxious to talk to me and that it couldn't be relayed. What is it?"

Faithfully and in almost verbatim form Bratchell gave him the conversation that had taken place between the lawyer and himself, while his visitor listened without interruption and with a grave attention.

When the recital came to its end Crandall nodded and his lips were straight, but he spoke without ap-

parent apprehension as he stood by the window loading his pipe.

"No good fretting over his not consulting me," he declared. "I suppose Smith had to accept the woman's terms or lose the chance for a parley, but I'm not a damn bit pleased over having to wait until to-morrow to hear from him. Time's valuable just now. May I use your 'phone?"

He called Smith's home on Long Island and stood waiting during what seemed to Muir a tediously protracted delay.

"That you, Mr. Smith? Crandall speaking," snapped the inspector when at length his connection had been established. "I've just talked with Bratcheil. Been out of town. Did it come off? Did you get anything?"

Again the mountain lawyer waited, and then he heard Crandall laugh shortly.

"No, naturally you can't—not over the 'phone—but I can come out. Hours can't be squandered—they count. I'll be right out there—within an hour."

After that the detective still stood at the 'phone, and Muir conjectured from the play of expression over his face that he was listening impatiently and in a spirit of disagreement to some argument from the other end. At length he jerked his head sharply:

"Very well," he conceded brusquely, "have it your own way. Of course if you've given your word I have to stand by it, I suppose. But none the less, I'm sending a man out to your place. . . . He won't ask any questions but he'll be responsible for your safety un-

til you leave your house to-morrow—and until you reach your office. I'm not willing to take needless chances, if you are. That's final. I'll see you myself at nine-thirty in the morning."

Crandall hung up and turned away from the 'phone with a philosophic shrug.

"I don't get much out of him," he told Muir. "Naturally, he can't talk over the wire, but he seems confident that at last we've got a warm trail to follow. I gather that his informant exacted time to get out of danger's way before he relayed her message to anyone at all. I suppose that's fair enough provided he can get her here later on. Anyhow, he's safe in his own house, and I'm sending an escort out there to play bodyguard. To-morrow should tell the story of whether this means anything."

The young attorney was at headquarters early the next morning. He was there before Crandall himself arrived, and when the inspector led him into his office and took up a sheaf of report forms from the wire basket on his desk, the mountain lawyer was a shade perplexed at his seeming leisurliness of manner. But while Crandall ran through his memoranda with an eye skimming them of essentials he offered a word of explanation.

"I've had a ring from my man. Smith came to town safely. My operative left him in his own reception room and is on the way downtown now. We won't wait for him, though. We'll run along up there at once and listen to Smith's story at first hand. I hope it's not a dud."

If the inspector seemed deliberate, it was a delib-

eration which made for haste in the end. His movements were all unhurried, but when he started north it was in a police car driven by a uniformed man and the traffic opened for it as it swung under the Arch and into the Avenue. In a few minutes it had drawn to the curb at the front of the Delaware office building and Crandall nodded with satisfaction as he glanced at his watch. He still had the margin of some minutes to spare before the appointed time of nine-thirty.

In the reception room Miss Cary looked up from her desk and smiled.

"Mr. Smith left word for me to send you in as soon as you came," she said. "He's been here a half hour."

Crandall nodded, then asked casually, "Has Mr. Smith seen anyone else since he arrived?"

The young woman paused and shook her head.

"A gentleman came in with him, but he didn't go into the private office," she answered, and again Crandall nodded.

"That was my man. I was only wondering whether any one from the D. A.'s office had been here yet."

"No. No one has gone in—except myself. Mr. Smith called me in to take some dictation about twenty minutes ago, but when I had gotten my notebook ready he shook his head and smiled. 'After all,' he said, 'I guess I'd better give this to Crandall orally before I confide it even to you.' The way he said it to me made me feel that it was something exciting—though he never shows excitement."

"Thank you." The inspector moved forward as

though he, too, were urged by an excitement which he did not wish to show; as though he were restive of so short a delay as he had permitted by asking a brief question and receiving a somewhat lengthy reply.

The young woman rose to open the door for them, but as she did so her telephone jangled and Crandall stepped to the threshold himself, as she turned back to the instrument.

Muir entered at his heels, and with a quick gesture Crandall motioned him aside and closed the door softly.

The two men had to step sharply aside to avoid the body that lay on the floor. It lay on its back with a look of surprise on the lean and urbane face which had not yet fully been drained of the colour of life, yet it lay as still as it would ever lie, and through the light gray waistcoat, where the coat fell back, was a small puncture, not powder-burned, but moist with blood from the heart.

CHAPTER XVII

NEITHER of the two men who had entered the room and closed the door behind them was new to the view of death nor given to emotional outbursts. For a long moment neither of them spoke or moved. It was as though they were readjusting their minds to the shock of an unbelievable thing, and while they sought such readjustment they were wary not to disarrange by so much as a needless footfall any seemingly trivial thing which might develop vital import.

Muir raised eyes that had narrowed and kindled with a hard light and stood with them fixed on the face of his companion. Crandall, for his part, wore a noncommittal expression, which after the first moment of shocked amazement had settled into one of studious concentration. He stood stock-still while his gaze ranged, and following that gaze, the Kentuckian could read it as though the eyes were actually speaking.

The inspector's glance went first to the broad window—with its lower sash raised as it was usually raised on these bright days of Indian summer warmth. He noted the exact position of the body, lying near the door which opened into the reception room, and which was the only entrance to the inner office. He studied the interior hastily, yet with a comprehensive minuteness, making note of the entire

order of everything, the position of each piece of furniture, and found it a scene undisturbed by any indication of excitement or struggle. Then, as if treading among eggshells, he moved to the window and looked out. He bent over the sill and gazed studiously down. The court below ending in a roof two stories high was empty. There was no cornice or support along the wall outside by which entry or exit through the window was a possibility. The court itself was wide and hemmed in by walls. Many of the other visible windows stood open, like this one. Through some could be seen the figures of girls seated at typewriter tables. Across the way a white-jacketed man was leaning over a dentist's chair. Another window framed a figure in an operating gown busy with a microscope. Nowhere, in the many thumbnail glimpses of the life of that human hive, was any note of distracted attention, any indication of a man or woman who had been startled by the sound of gunfire.

On a mahogany stand at one corner of the room hung the hat and stick of the dead lawyer. On his desk was his opened brief case and the papers which had evidently been taken from it and placed methodically on the glass covering of the flat-topped desk. In an ash tray rested the stub of a cigarette so lately laid down that though it had burned itself out, its ash was still fresh, and clinging.

Muir Bratchell's eyes were gauging all these things, too, at first following the lead of the other eyes, then estimating, appraising, and photographing of their own initiative.

It had all taken seconds only, and neither of those

two men had need to question whether or not any guttering spark of life still lingered in the quiet body on the floor. Each of them had known contact with death in its sudden aspects before and knew its stamp and seal. All that remained living there was the fresh aster, still spicy of fragrance, in the lawyer's coat lapel.

Yet now, since such formalities cannot be long omitted, Crandall knelt and bent his ear to the punctured breast. From his pocket he took a small mirror and held it close to the lips. Muir, standing a step away, was conscious of the industrious clatter of typewriter keys from the reception room, where Miss Cary had her desk.

The inspector rose to his feet again and swept his eyes about the place in a summary of scrutiny, then in a low voice which was grimly level, he spoke for the first time:

"It looks to me as if his visitor had told him something—last night."

Muir only nodded in silence. Now Crandall's hand was on the knob of the door, and he swung it open.

The inspector stepped out with Muir following him as the door closed silently behind them. In the moment it took to pass from the room where they had encountered the fourth tragedy of a seeming sequence, to the other which still wore an untroubled calmness, the detective's features had obliterated from their expression every trace of the unusual. For all his haste he stood for a space unannounced, studiously looking down from his height of six feet. The Kentuckian was quick to school his own features into

a like effacement of any betrayal, and his eyes fell on the slim girl whose deft fingers were rapidly playing on the type keys. She had not yet seen them, and her face was in profile. Muir had thought of her heretofore impersonally, as efficient and agreeable of manner. Now he realized that she was also pretty and freshly young.

As Crandall's voice came calmly the girl glanced up from her shorthand notes, a smile on her lips which forbore from any question and yet which indicated a hopefulness that she was to hear something of what had been discussed inside. She had been close enough to all the mysteries of preceding phases to acknowledge a keen and youthfully excited curiosity. That, as the watching men recognized, was what her eyes and lips mirrored now—that and nothing more.

"One question or two that you can answer as well as anyone else, Miss Cary," said Crandall, in a conversational tone, "who opens this suite in the mornings? Who gets here first?"

"I usually do. I come about nine and others of the staff soon after."

"And this morning?"

"I was the first this morning. I was a little earlier than usual, because Mr. Smith said he would be here about nine."

"And the other members of the office force?"

"Mr. Warren is out of town. Mr. Smithers 'phoned that he was working on some outside business and wouldn't be in until late, and Mr. Crosby was going to court in the Bronx. They haven't come in yet."

"And Mr. Welligan?"

"He usually gets in about ten, but he hasn't come yet. Mr. Smith and myself were the only ones this morning."

Crandall nodded.

"Then from the time you opened the office until we came——"

"No one has come in except Mr. Smith himself and the detective who went out again at once."

"And—but for these exceptions, you have been here alone?"

She nodded, and her eyes grew a shade more serious as it occurred to her that the line of questioning was taking an unexpected trend.

"Could anyone have passed through this reception room without your seeing him?"

"No, I'm sure no one has passed through. No one ever goes in without being announced."

"But even furtively——?"

The shake of her head was definite.

"No," she made positive assertion. "Not furtively or otherwise." Then her tone became anxious, "Why —has anything——?"

Crandall came a step forward and his features let slip the mask of studied composure to become deeply sober. His voice was kindly and held considerate note of steadying support.

"You've got to hold yourself together now, girl," he told her. "You've got to brace yourself for a shock and take it standing. You must help us—and you can't afford to break down." His head jerked toward the door he had just closed.

Her throat contracted in a gulp and the colour ran out of her cheeks.

"You mean——?" she gasped the two words and got no further.

The inspector nodded his head slowly.

"He's been murdered—in there—in the last half hour."

Olivia Cary came to her feet slowly with dilating pupils, and for a moment Muir thought she would fall. He stepped forward, but already Crandall's hand was under her elbow.

"It's a smashing jolt," he said quietly, "but you've got to hold on tight."

"But—but—it isn't possible——"

"Impossible things appear to be happening."

Again the slender throat was spasmodically convulsed, and then, like an echo on a thunder clap, the full import of the detective's announcement broke on her. Her face was paper white and her voice was a whisper.

"I tell you it's impossible. . . . There was no one here but me."

"And yet," the inspector reminded her, "he's in there—and he's dead."

It was the sequence of the words which struck Muir with a shock of surprise and misery. Crandall could not mean to accuse this girl. His whole manner belied such an attitude, and yet what he had just said, following on what she had just said, came like successive steps toward an obvious conclusion, and as though the implication were slowly dawning on her, too, Olivia Cary gave back as from a blow.

She stood unsteadily, as if in the fog of sudden horror all things were distorted and nightmarishly vague; then she spoke slowly and faintly:

"Do you mean that I—that I——? But it's all too horrible! He was so fine."

"You know I don't suspect you any more than I suspect myself," Crandall assured her evenly, "but here we are, the three of us, and we are the only human beings who seem to have had access to him. Technically, I suppose we might all be under suspicion, as far as that goes. Mr. Bratchell and myself discovered him. That's our story and it happens to be true, yet no one knew he was dead when we went in—and when we came out he was. Just now there's plenty to be done, and we need you to help us. You'll do it, too Your attitude shows that. Even under these circumstances your thought was for him."

The girl straightened resolutely.

"Yes," she answered in a tight-throated voice, "I'll do my best. Give me your orders."

"Ring these numbers." He snapped out several calls. "They are the coroner's examiner, the district police station, and my office. Have Lieutenant Rossi come himself from the station, and when you get headquarters, have them send Deputy Inspector Carrol."

"And—" she had taken up the instrument—"and his family?"

"They'll have to know soon enough. Get those others first and Mr. Welligan—wait—here he is now."

Welligan was a large and powerful man with a full face and iron-gray hair. He had been a football star in college days and in later life had taken on too much flesh. Now, of the little group in the room where the body lay, he alone seemed prostrated and distrait. His heavy neck and face were unnatural in their pallor and he walked the floor under the stress of his violent nerve shock.

"The bullet," announced the coroner's examiner crisply and decisively, "entered at the front, penetrated the heart, ranging slightly downward, as though the victim were seated and his assailant standing. It penetrated the chest cavity and came through. It was just inside the coat at the back."

"And that ball," said Crandall, taking it from the hand of the physician, "is from a pistol—a nickel-jacketed bullet—of small calibre."

"Whatever it was fired from," the coroner's representative told them decisively, "it caused instantaneous death—or practically instantaneous." He paused and added perplexedly, "Yet if he was seated, as the downward range would indicate, he must have risen and moved a step or two to have fallen where he lay. That's hard to believe with the heart pierced."

"That shot," volunteered Lieutenant Rossi helpfully, "wasn't fired close enough to leave a powder burn—so it wasn't suicide. No one heard it, with windows open all around and that girl sitting in the next room. That means a silencer, of course."

Welligan halted in his distracted pacing.

"My God, men," he exclaimed desperately, "what

difference does it make whether a silencer was used or whether the bullet was fired from a pistol? The pistol didn't fire itself, did it? How did the murderer get in here? How did he get out? Those are the questions."

"It makes a material difference as to what the weapon was," Crandall reminded him quietly. "If it had been a rifle, for instance, it might conceivably have been fired from across the court, but no pistol could carry that distance with killing accuracy. If it was a pistol it eliminates any idea of the murderer having been outside this room, and this is undeniably a pistol bullet." He handed the thing to Muir.

"That's your line, Bratchell, isn't it? Could that slug have been fired through anything else?"

Muir looked at the thing and shook his head.

"It's the bullet of a pistol gun," he said. "It's a twenty-five calibre, I'm right sure—twenty-five is mighty small bore for anything but short-range work. It's a sort of toy gun."

"In the automatics, though," Rossi reminded him, "the twenty-five is a handy little weapon and a wicked one, at that. It's got plenty of penetration if you stand close enough, and a woman can carry one in a vanity bag. In a man's pocket it hardly makes a sag or a bulge."

Crandall took the small but sufficiently fatal missile from Muir's hand, and after studying it a while, gave it over to Rossi.

"Seal it up in an envelope, Lieutenant," he directed, "and mark it for evidence. The firearms experts can tell us whether or not it was fired from any given pis-

tol—if we ever get a given pistol to compare with it."

"Do you mean," asked Bratchell curiously, "that if you've got a gun and a bullet these fellows can say for sure whether that particular slug went through that particular barrel?"

The inspector nodded. "They can match the spiraling and the marks as definitely as you can identify a thumb print."

"Yeah," growled Rossi. "If we ever get the gun. If we had ham we could have ham and eggs—if we had eggs."

"Deputy Inspector Carroll is checking up on the other offices in the building," Crandall told them. "For the moment we can leave that to him. We know, meanwhile, that Smith talked to someone last night—a woman—and it's going to be as hard to get that woman back into our ken as to find out whom Mahaffey talked to. The family must be notified at once. Welligan, you'd better do that now. We must thresh out every detail of what happened at his house last night."

"Yes, I must break it to them," the partner of the dead man groaned. "My God, what a duty!"

"One thing's as sure as hell. Someone came in here and killed a man and went out—and the only way lies through that reception room."

Rossi faced the group and spoke doggedly:

"It ain't a nice thing to bring up, but there's a girl there that was there all the time. I don't see how we can overlook that."

Welligan had sunk dejectedly into a chair at the

desk and thrust out his hand for the 'phone. Now he straightened and his face became belligerent.

"I can answer for that girl," he broke out angrily. "You might as well suspect me. Olivia Cary's a niece of mine. She's a college girl and as fine as gold——"

"All right. I ain't denying that she's kin to you and a nice girl, but she was there, wasn't she?" demanded Rossi. "I ain't got anything against her, but we can't blink that away."

"As far as that goes," Crandall put in calmly, "you might mention that Mr. Bratchell and myself came in here, too, before his death had been otherwise discovered. It's physically possible that we killed Smith —but we didn't."

"Well, I ask you," Rossi swept his eyes around the room and gestured with his spread palms. "Here's a room that has one entrance. Here's a dead man, shot with a pistol—and that means close range. Here's——"

"So far," interrupted Crandall drily, "you're only recapitulating mysteries. We have plenty of them already."

The precinct police commander nodded moodily.

"They don't give us time to get used to one murder before the next one breaks," he lamented; then he reached for the bullet and sat studying it. Suddenly a faint flash of hope glimmered in his eyes.

"Say, Crandall," he announced, "you used this fellow, Dawes Fleetwell, to try to identify a dead man. He couldn't do that but there's one thing he's a shark on. He knows guns. He knows more about them than

the bomb squad or anybody else we've got. I want him to size up this place."

Crandall nodded:

"By all means," he said. "Use anybody you want and any way you want. We aren't turning down any help, but what can he tell you?"

Sylvia Smith was pale and nerve-tense but courageously self-controlled when Crandall and Rossi visited her at the house on Long Island that afternoon, but Welligan moved nervously about, wholly unable to remain quietly seated.

"Yes, I know these questions have to be answered," she said, in response to Crandall's apology for so early an intrusion on her grief. "Maybe it's as easy to take them up now as later."

"Mr. Welligan tells me, Miss Smith," began the inspector, "that your mother is in Europe, and that during her absence your father and yourself were here alone."

The girl bowed her affirmation.

"Except for the servants," she amended.

"Did your father indicate to you that he expected an interview of more than usual importance last night?"

"No. Father didn't enlarge on the importance. He spoke of an appointment. Of course I knew, in a general way, that he was investigating crime conditions. It had something to do with that, I think."

"But he told you that he was expecting a visitor last night?"

"Yes. He said that he was to talk with someone—a woman whom he had promised to see alone."

"Miss Smith, it is most important for us to find out who that woman was. Until we get in touch with her we seem to be marking time in a blind alley. Please tell us in your own way everything that you can about last night."

"I'll try—but I'm afraid I can't help you much. Father dined in town and I had dinner with friends at the Country Club. When I came in about eleven he was here. That was when he mentioned to me that he was waiting to talk to this woman about some evidence. He said she would come late."

"Did you see her when she came?"

"No. Father and I chatted for a half hour or so and then I went up to my room. He said he had promised this visitor that she could see him entirely alone and that he had let the servants go to bed."

"I see. And did you know when this person came and went?"

"I had undressed and was reading in bed when I heard a car come into the driveway and stop. Its brakes screeched. Then the bell rang and the door closed. Father must have opened it himself. There was no one else but myself nearer than the servants' quarters in another wing of the house."

"I suppose you heard no voice that you could recognize again?"

"No. I did hear a drone of voices downstairs, but no words. I didn't notice that either voice rose or sounded excited, but of course I wasn't paying close attention."

"How long did the interview last?"

"About an hour. I was still reading when the door closed and I heard the car start again. A few minutes later I heard father come up the stairs and go along the hall to his own room."

"And that was all you know?"

"That's all except that sometime later, perhaps an hour after that, the telephone rang. It startled me a little because it was so late and I started out into the hall—there's an extension there—but father had already gotten to the 'phone, so I went back."

Crandall nodded.

"I was talking to your father on the wire. Then it would seem that no one here, except your father himself, saw or could recognize the woman."

The daughter shook her head.

"No. Father stopped at my door after he'd spoken to you and told me that a man was coming out from headquarters and that he would spend the night. He said he'd let this man in and look after him. Of course I met him at breakfast, but nothing was said about the woman and he and father drove away together."

"It has seemed a little strange to us," Crandall told her, "in view of the seriousness of this case, that your father left no written note or memorandum of his interview last night. At least, we find none in his pockets or in his brief case. It would seem likely that if he learned of names, dates, or places, he would not have trusted them solely to his memory. Do you know whether he left any such memo here, this morning?"

Sylvia knew nothing of the sort unless, she suggested, the wall safe in her father's study contained

such a paper. It was in the study that he had talked last night, but she had never been taught the combination.

"I have that," said Welligan. Under his touch the dial turned and the tumblers obeyed, but the safe held nothing that helped them.

CHAPTER XVIII

"I CAME in this morning," Muir told Crandall at headquarters, "like the bad penny that keeps turning up, but after all I'm not just butting in. Mr. Welligan asked me to keep in touch with you as his associate. He says he's too overwrought to attend to a matter that touches him so personally as this."

"Good enough, Bratchell," commented the inspector briefly. "That arrangement suits me. We understand each other, for one thing. This morning I've got to step on the gas, but I'll bring you up to date since last night. That won't take long. Rossi has just called and asked me to meet him at Smith's office."

"Then you can sum up as we go along, can't you?"

"That was what I was going to suggest. Let's go."

Seated in the police car before which the traffic opened as the dead sea was sundered for the children of Israel, the inspector talked rapidly.

"To go back for a moment from Smith to the unknown man. He's been lying at the morgue now since Tuesday, and we know as little of his identity as we did at first. No one has claimed his body for burial, no one has put in a claim for the jewellery he wore, worth about a thousand dollars, or the roll of bills that came close to another thousand. We have telegraphed his description to the principal police headquarters in this country, Canada, and Mexico. We

have already heard from the photographs and finger prints that we rushed to places as near by as Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore, and Boston. At none of those towns is this man indexed—and the fact remains that he was important enough to some criminals to need killing. Several people saw Mahaffey after we did, but all of them within an hour or so. He dropped into the station house and talked to Rossi, but the lieutenant says he gave him no hint of anything material. The margin of his movements after that remains as blank as ever. Two women seem the important figures now. One of them caused the traffic jam and the other visited Smith. They are still mysteries and that brings us to Smith, the third of our almost daily murders—and the fourth all told."

"Yes. What about him?"

"Nothing new. The work there has been chiefly checking up. More exhaustive medical examinations only confirm what you heard the coroner's examiner say yesterday morning. A close search and study of the premises leave us where the preliminary examination did yesterday. A fine-tooth combing of that office building accounts for every office on all sides of the court from which he might have been seen and shot by light artillery. Everyone was either occupied at the time by unimpeachable tenants or locked and accessible only to an equally unassailable superintendent. The impossible seemings of yesterday appear impossible certainties to-day—unless Miss Cary killed him or——"

"Or us," interrupted Muir bluntly. "I'd as leave work on that hypothesis as on her."

Crandall nodded. "So would I. So far as I'm concerned she's out, which brings me to the alternative. That is that in spite of her certainty to the contrary, someone slipped by her and slipped out again unseen. When you and I came out of that room I tested her in a fashion. She didn't know we had come through the door until I spoke. I might have gotten into the hall with the same result."

"What does Rossi want up there this morning?" inquired Muir, and Crandall shrugged.

"Rossi is rather frantic. He sees himself sneezing in the sack if he doesn't turn a trick and turn it soon. Being more excitable than talented he's shooting at the moon. Whatever he wants, I predict in strict confidence, will be something dumb and ineffective. Cops are like pugs. Get one mad and excited and you've got him licked."

In Smith's private office Rossi was waiting impatiently, and with him was Dawes Fleetwell. The actor presented as debonair a bearing as usual, and he smiled amiably on the two new arrivals.

"When I told you to call on me if I could help," he said self-importantly to Crandall, "I didn't flatter myself that the summons would come so soon—or that the case would have grown so important."

The inspector did not smile in return. Instead his brow gathered almost irritably, and he threw back his response with deliberate curtness.

"I didn't send for you."

"But your colleague did. Lieutenant Rossi thought I might quality as an expert on firearms."

"All right, that's his privilege." The inspector

turned to the district lieutenant. "What did you want, Rossi?"

"I wanted you to be with us while I asked Fleetwell some questions on the ground."

"Very well, I'm here. Shoot your questions. Personally, I don't see that the firearms point is the most important just now."

Dawes was sitting on the edge of Smith's desk, swinging his malacca stick, and his handsome face wore the indulgence of a scientist who waits while the law wrangles. Now he spoke urbanely.

"It's my strong impression that all these killings were done by the same gunman—the trained killer of an organized gang."

"If we can prove that," growled Rossi, "it would divide our job by four."

"If we can prove it—and then get the man," corrected Crandall. "It's a hypothesis that has naturally suggested itself from the first, and at best it's a mere guess."

"It may be a good guess," insisted Dawes. "I know guns and I've studied gunmen in a fashion, too, in order to analyze their use of firearms. The gang killer usually uses an automatic pistol—unless it's a machine-gun job. Generally he doesn't shoot once only but empties his gun. Still there are gang murders on record where only one shot was fired."

"Say," Crandall drawled his response inhospitably, "are you trying to teach me the alphabet, Fleetwell? We knew all that before you were born."

But Dawes was in nowise disconcerted. He shrugged indifferently. "I might have cut out the

foreword," he made smiling admission. "Of course you didn't need it. Now three of these men have been shot with automatic pistols of the same calibre, and two of them were shot several times. Another trick of the gang killer is that he usually throws his gun away after the job. That's where he's different from a mountaineer. Down home a man can't afford to do that."

Crandall's expression had become a shade less hostile and he nodded his head with a germ of interest.

"Who ever pulled the job at Thirty-ninth Street did just that. He tossed his pistol into the dead man's car."

Dawes nodded.

"It may or may not have been the same gun that bumped off Mahaffey. Maybe there was plenty of time for a safe getaway after that murder, but in all the cases except Smith's it was the same type and calibre of pistol that did the work. Here the killer had to change his style and work differently. He needed a silencer and he knew a silencer is next to worthless on a short-barrelled gun."

The inspector was at last listening with a greater attentiveness, but he challenged the premises.

"So your theory is that the same gang gunman killed Archibald, Mahaffey, the unidentified man in the coupé, and finally Smith. You base that theory on the fact that each of the first three was shot with cartridges of the same calibre and type, indicating the automatic, and in that you are correct, yet you hold to that same theory here where the calibre is different."

"I'm basing my theory on the fact that the most logical motive for killing Smith was that of the crooks he was after. Lieutenant Rossi tells me you have decided a pistol did the job here, too. He says the bullet was too small to have carried a long distance—so it must have been fired close. He says you've canvassed people in the other offices and that though a number of windows were up all around, nobody heard any shot or any noise like a shot. That looks like a job with a silencer, and I'd be willing to bet my right arm no short-barrelled pistol can be silenced with any success. It must be a barrel too long for a pocket gun or a holster gun. So——"

"So what?"

"So it looks to me like the man that did this job knew his game, and that this time he used a small cartridge and longer barrel, and that there was a silencer on it."

"You say, and you are right, that the gangster usually throws his gun away," Crandall pointed out. "In this case that wasn't done."

Dawes bowed his head in assent, but he answered speculatively:

"That would seem fairly certain. I reckon you searched the place as close as it could be searched?"

"Naturally. I was here myself," Crandall told him.

"There weren't any very likely places to throw it away here, if he aimed to hide it," put in Muir, who until now had taken no part in the conversation, "unless he pitched it through that window or behind some furniture."

"The bookcases and filing cases are built in—or

rather built up in metal sections," contributed Rossi. "They go flush to the walls. We didn't move them."

Dawes was walking attentively about the room, and his manner held the self-conscious, actor pose which he never fully relinquished.

At length he tapped a tall metal file case with his stick.

"There's one that looks temporary," he observed. "It doesn't go entirely back against the wall, does it? I can't quite make out."

Crandall was filling his pipe. "All right," he grunted. "Don't let's leave any stone unturned. Lend a hand, men. Let's jerk the thing out and have a look."

The case was heavy and the four men put the strength of their shoulders into shifting it.

Straightening up, Dawes drew a monogrammed handkerchief from his pocket and fastidiously flicked the dust from his hands.

It was Crandall who stooped down and reached for something in the shadow behind the heavy obstruction. He came up with his face for once full of amazement, and it was an amazement tinged with chagrin for the conviction of a former lack of thoroughness.

In his hand he held a long-barrelled pistol of queer design fitted at its muzzle with a silencer.

Dawes for once exercised the restraint of a good actor. He gave no indication of the pleasurable emotion of a volunteer whose advances had received scant welcome and yet whose suggestion had scored.

He stood back now while the inspector turned the slender and deadly thing in his hand, holding it by the barrel, as he looked at it intently. As the detective handled it he refrained from touching the grip.

"This thing," he said slowly, "is not an automatic and it's not a revolver. It's a single-shot affair. It's a target pistol."

He put his handkerchief around the weapon to preserve intact any finger prints which might have been registered there.

"Now," said Rossi excitedly, "we'd better have an expert find out how old the last powder burn in the barrel is. A chemist can do that, can't he?"

Crandall nodded.

"Not only that," he announced, "but we can determine positively whether the bullet we found was fired from this gun—though that seems a thing we may assume. Rossi, where is that bullet?"

"It's sealed and marked for court evidence," the lieutenant assured him. "You remember you gave it to me when the coroner took it from the body. I'll bring it down to headquarters when I go back."

Almost modestly, for he could afford modesty now, Dawes offered a suggestion.

"May I look at the gun?"

As he took it he thoughtlessly let the handkerchief slip and held it as a man would grasp it for use.

At once he realized what he had done as Crandall warned him in a quick voice and rewrapped the gun in its covering.

"That was dumb of me," he declared contritely.

"But my prints can be compared—and I held it lightly. I guess I didn't spoil what was underneath." Then he went on:

"Finding that proves one thing, anyhow. Whoever fired it did stop long enough to slip it there."

"Finding that," supplemented Rossi, "proves a damn sight more important point than that. It proves that the assassin stood in this room and that ain't so good for the girl that was sitting just outside the door, if you ask me."

"Still hanging on to your 'essential clue,' eh, Rossi?" inquired Crandall coolly. "That's what's wrecked Scotland Yard more than once."

"I don't know many women, unless they be right hardened ones, that could put a bullet through a man's heart like that," demurred Dawes. "If this girl hasn't been a pistol shot before, with a lot of practice, you can count her out—except, perhaps, as an accomplice. Of course she might have let someone else in."

"So might the Bishop of New York have had a key made and let himself in—but I don't think he did," was Crandall's disdainful comment.

"I don't know the young lady, except for seeing her as I came through," was Fleetwell's apologetic reminder. "I was only conjecturing, but I stick to my opinion that this was done by a typical gang killer who knew his stuff."

He paused, then looked at his wrist watch.

"If you're through with me, gentlemen, I'll toddle along," he told them airily. "I have an appointment on the third floor of this building and I'm already a little late."

Rossi clapped him approvingly on the back.

"Come into the station house when you get through," he urged. "I don't want to lose touch with you, son. You've scored one for us."

That evening Crandall and Muir dined together at a small restaurant near Times Square. The inspector wanted later in the evening to visit the Delaware Building when, except for night-working tenants and charwomen, it would be empty and when the night watchman could quietly escort him to any point he wished to visit.

On their way to the dining place the detective stopped at a news booth and bought the latest editions. He realized that from now on the reporters would be a graver embarrassment to him than they had been heretofore. Such a case as this could not fail to throw the news writers into alert action, and it was not practicable to withhold some things which the police would prefer to leave unpublished.

But seated at the table and glancing hastily over the first pages, he found nothing unexpected until he reached one of those journals which ran to red headline streamers and a flamboyant display of pictures. There his eye fell on portraits of Dawes Fleetwell, and he found the mountaineer described in staccato paragraphs. He was fulsomely depicted as a picturesque character whose genius for crime detection had thrown him into the limelight when the trained minds of the metropolitan police had confessed, or might as well have confessed, entire failure. To the native keenness of a man bred and reared in forests,

seemingly small but really vital things became at once apparent. Indications which were hidden from the eyes of the supposedly wise and prudent became manifest to this clear vision.

Crandall, who was reading to himself, suddenly burst out, "Hell's bells!" Then with more of open irritation than Muir had met in his manner before he made explanation: "See here, Bratchell. I want to read you something. Listen to this hooey, will you? The Sherlock Holmes referred to is our friend Dawes Fleetwell."

"He's no friend of mine," returned Muir with a quiet but obstinate tone which was almost sullen. "I've told you that before."

"I use the term in its Pickwickian sense. Myself I think he's a damn fool swollen up like a poisoned pup with self-conceit. Of course, I can't say so because he did get the scent to-day, whether it leads anywhere or not—and I didn't. But here's what the reportorial stylist has to say: 'This man, bred to the stern realities of life in the feud-ridden highlands of Kentucky, sees with the eye of the hawk and thinks with the unerring shrewdness of the fox. Reared to the code of the vendetta and sure of life only so long as his own senses remained keener and his own guesses more trustworthy than those of his sworn enemies, he brings to the city the instincts of the birds and beasts, for like them, he knows what it is to be hunted. Here is a man who unites the lore of the woodsman with the cosmopolitanism of the New Yorker.' "

The reader broke off and threw in his own interjection.

"How's that for pure swill. But that's not all. Listen to this effusion. 'This man from the land of the moonshiner and the feudist knows that in throwing himself into a fight which has baffled the police he invites the enmity of powerful and ruthless underworld forces, but he has been under the threat of death before, and he laughs at danger.' There's more than that, but that's enough. These reporters have discovered Fleetwell and have seized on him as colourful copy. They're playing him across the board, win, place, and show."

Muir nodded but he spoke indifferently.

"I've always known Dawes was right vain. He'll get a lavish pleasure out of all this, but I reckon it doesn't hurt anybody. If I were you I'd just stick a peacock feather in his shirt tail and let him strut himself to death."

But Crandall shook his head.

"I don't give a damn about his swelling up and strutting like a turkey gobbler. That's up to him. But my murder collection is above par now and it's paying hundred per cent. dividends every day or two. I don't want any more dead men, and this bird is advertising himself in a fashion that's asking for death."

"Well, can't you tell him to shut up? Can't you put an official padlock on his lip?"

"Unfortunately, I'm not sure. This ass Rossi has taken him in on the business, but as soon as we eat I'm going to his house. I'm going to try at least to make him see sense."

"If we're going to visit Dawes," suggested the mountain man, when they had finished their coffee and

the inspector still sat lingeringly at the empty table, "hadn't we better be makin' a start?"

Crandall nodded.

"I'm not just loafing, Bratchell," he said quietly. "I'm waiting for a man who is to meet me here."

He leaned over and went on in a lower voice:

"Since we parted at Smith's office," he explained, "I've been putting in some busy hours. Rossi brought me the bullet which we sealed up in that envelope on the morning of the Smith murder. You remember?"

"Yes, I remember right well."

"I wanted a test made as soon as possible to determine positively whether or not that bullet was fired from the pistol we found to-day. In spite of every indication to the contrary, I've found myself coming back to the slender possibility of that shot having been fired from outside the room."

"So you've put your firearms experts on matching up the pistol and the slug?"

Crandall shook his head.

"Not the department experts," he answered. "They are fairly competent, but I wanted an opinion that was better than that. There's a man named Casey who was once in the department. Now he's working for himself. I regard him as the most scientific man on ballistics in New York. He should have been here before this. He's late now."

But Hilary Casey did not keep them waiting long, and as soon as he had sunk into a seat, he nodded his head.

"O. K., Crandall," he announced with admirable brevity. "You can rest as sure as anything can be

sure, that the bullet you gave me and the pistol you gave me were partners in the job."

"Did you bring them to me?"

Casey smiled.

"No, naturally not. Your property clerk was at my elbow all the time I was working. The exhibits in evidence were never out of his sight, and he sealed both articles up and marked them in my presence. He took them back with him."

Crandall nodded.

"Then beyond doubt that was a pistol bullet—and it was fired from that target pistol?"

The other man's nod was decisive.

"We photograph the marks on the missile and magnify them. We match them with the spirals and the pits of the barrel itself. It's as conclusive as the whorls of a finger print. No two barrels in the world autograph their messages in precisely the same way."

Muir listened with an almost rapt attention, and then he ventured a question.

"Suppose, Mr. Casey, it were possible to shoot a pistol bullet through a rifle barrel—by some fashion of manipulatin' the load. You could tell that, too, couldn't you?"

Casey smiled.

"I should call that simple, though it might get by most police experts," he responded. "The rifling that spins the bullet in its flight makes a certain number of turns in the barrel. In the rifle those turns are fairly gradual; in the pistol they are of necessity sharper. They mark the bullet as it travels the length—short or long—and mark it differently."

Crandall shook his head.

"Pistol it is, then," he said, almost regretfully, "and that particular pistol. Now at least we must discard conflicting theories. Of course, we're trying to trace the pistol to its source, but that's a long job and an uncertain one."

CHAPTER XIX

WHEN the pair reached the boarding house in West Forty-fourth Street they found Dawes in the large parlour off the entrance hall. Usually he would have left the house at this hour for some more animated haunt along Broadway, but to-night he was tarrying awhile to hold court among his admirers. The pathetically shabby assortment of quasi-actors and pseudo-artists who like himself inhabited this rookery had read the papers, and the news had brought to their squalid building the unaccustomed glamour of something like celebrity. In this atmosphere Dawes was basking as the inspector and Muir entered the departed splendour of the place which had, in the brownstone age, been a mansion.

Lissy was sitting quietly in the background. Soon she would go to the theatre to wait for her boy and bring him back.

"Fleetwell," announced Crandall briefly, "I'd like a few words with you," and Dawes smiled graciously. He turned with a grand manner to the room in general and said, "Ladies and gentlemen, my excuses. This gentleman is the head of the detective bureau. He wishes to confer with me." With a bow he left the room, and the actors felt that he was not just walking out of the door but making an exit with its proper dramatic value.

Dawes led his visitors up the narrow stairs to his own room and ushered them in.

"These are not suitable quarters for entertainment," he said, "but they are temporary. We are looking for better." Felicity, who had come quietly along, flushed as she thought how long this temporary arrangement had endured. Dawes was inviting them, with a gesture, to be seated.

Crandall remained standing.

"I'm in a hurry," he said crisply. "I came to talk to you about those newspaper stories."

Fleetwell nodded, and his smile was deprecatory.

"Yes, the newspaper boys rather spread themselves, didn't they? However, I gave out nothing that Rossi didn't approve. They interviewed me at the station house."

"That's not what I'm kicking about," Crandall informed him. "Of course, if you were tipping our hand to the press in a way that hampered us I wouldn't confer with you. I'd tell you where to head in and I'd tell you plainly."

"What is it, then?" Dawes had stiffened a little at the brusque tone which his visitor had chosen to assume.

"It's this. You're asking for the works, that's all. Laymen who volunteer to help the cops in a fight like this don't make themselves popular with the killers. Get that straight, Fleetwell. I'm not given to spreading needless alarms. I'm not even going into the fact that when you advertise yourself so widely you cease to be helpful to us. I didn't invite you in and I can

spare you—but I have enough murders on my hands without your joining the casualties and that's the straight of it."

"Inspector," said Dawes with impudent deliberation, "are you trying to teach me the alphabet? I believe you asked me the same question this morning, and I was lucky enough to be able to remind you of a letter you'd overlooked."

Crandall's eyes narrowed and snapped.

"I'm not trying to teach you anything. I'm telling you something. I realize that all this publicity and bunk is gratifying to your personal vanity—but it's not worth it. Three men are dead because they tried to find out things and tell them to the police. They didn't advertise themselves unduly—but they got the works. I'm here to warn you that you're crying for the same dose."

"Thank you." The man from the hills, who had become in seeming so typical a Broadwayite, was grave now and his manner was straightforward. "I like straight talk and I'm going to answer you the same way. I'm not wholly dumb. No word will ever get out through me that will embarrass the police, but as for myself, I'm using my own judgment."

"Is it judgment—or vanity?"

"It's judgment, Inspector. I'm an actor. Publicity to me means opportunity—money—success. A week of prominence on the front pages, in a thing like this, can make a man. It's not stage prominence, of course, but it's personality prominence. It means that offers will be coming my way in crowds. Managers that

have kept me cooling my heels in their anterooms will be bidding for me. You know this man's town. Am I right or not?"

"Perhaps you're half right, but dead actors depreciate rapidly, Mr. Fleetwell. They're not worth much on the slab."

"I'm not in the morgue yet, Mr. Crandall, and between ourselves I have the notion I can keep out. You made a nasty crack about my vanity just now. If it's vanity it's calculated—it's playing a part and that's my profession. I tell you this ballyhoo is as valuable to me as a double page ad printed in colour in a magazine that charges twenty grand for that same space. These gangsters got the others before they suspected their danger, perhaps. I'm walking warily. As an actor doing shooting stunts I have a pistol permit—and I know how to use the gun. When they get me you won't have to hunt for all my killers. One or two of them will be lying right there and that's that. Thank you for your warning, but I have calculated the risk and as a publicity stunt this business is worth it. My eyes are open."

The inspector jerked his head impatiently and Dawes went on:

"I know and you know that I'm not any Sherlock Holmes. I didn't do anything to-day except get a lucky break. This newspaper talk is all the bunk—but if they want to give me a million dollars' worth of space, who am I to deny them?"

Crandall turned toward the door. "I had to warn you," he said, "and I've done it. You've got a wife and a child. I've done what I could."

Dawes accompanied his visitors down the stairs and Felicity stood alone in the room where he had left her.

For some time now she had been realizing that this man who had so dazzled and hypnotized her youth was in all but externals an ineffective. The fascination of a personality which brightened the eyes of women had, for the woman who knew him best, become dimmed. Almost with despair she had been accepting her fate as the price of a fatal mistake; a price which she must go on paying.

Now suddenly and irrationally all that seemed changed. Once again the tall man with the vivid colour and strength seemed to grow in stature. Once again she was realizing his arresting and potent challenge to the senses. He might not be willing to work hard for a livelihood, but true to the warrior tradition, he was willing to face jeopardy for success. He was not a blind fool but a fearless and resourceful man.

Dawes was in real danger. She had that from the lips of the inspector whose business was to diagnose such conditions. Dawes was going through with it, and Felicity's heart pounded with a sudden tumult of fear. For the first time in many weeks she thought of Dawes Fleetwell as her man—her lover. She had not fully admitted it to herself, but since that meeting in the theatre she had been rather wistfully thinking of Muir Bratchell. He was the man she had not appreciated in time and had lost. Her simple code would have regarded a confession of that as a damnable sin, yet a woman can treasure her faded roses of romance like a flower pressed in an old book.

Muir was steadily climbing toward success. Dawes was drifting ineffectually among the ghosts of disappointment and futility. That had been yesterday's parallel of appraisal.

Now Dawes had stepped forth and for a day or two was catching the fickle eye of the city. He was casting bold and picturesque defiance to cohorts of murder. It was as if the spotlight had been turned on him and the shadow had taken the other man.

The upper corridors of the Delaware Building were well-nigh empty when Crandall and Muir Bratchell, accompanied by the night watchman, wandered through them; wandered, as it seemed to the mountain man, somewhat aimlessly. Window lights burned here and there where tenants were working overtime, and in the hallways slovenly-looking women glanced up as they knelt swabbing the tiled hallways, but for the most part the great pile of masonry presented the aspect of a sleeping hive.

"This," said Crandall thoughtfully, "is the top floor and that court is really nothing but a large-sized air and light vent. Its bottom is the roof of the central hallways and it's inclosed on four sides."

"If a man could have got to it through Mr. Smith's window, any fashion," added Muir as if completing the line of thought, "he could have gotten out through the building itself but——"

"But not even a human fly could have scaled down eighteen stories at a busy hour without being seen."

The night watchman who acted as their guide went along with a silent interest, and as they stood in the

hall before the doors of the Smith & Welligan suite he asked, "Where next, gentlemen?"

Crandall shrugged his shoulder and answered gloomily, "We might as well go up on the roof again. I've been there twice, but I'm always hoping that some idea will come."

The man who carried the electric torch was slightly lame. Now he turned and limped ahead of them to a door marked "service," which he opened with a key from his bunch.

"Of course I'm not here in the daytime," he said, "but I always find this door locked when I come on at night. I guess it's locked in the daytime, too."

The inspector assented with a nod of his head. "Whenever I've come in the daytime," he gave corroboration, "I've had to have it unlocked by one of the superintendent's men—and the only way to the roof lies through two such doors."

They climbed an inclosed flight of stairs and came out onto the tarred flatness of the roof itself. Up there were the penthouses of the elevators, the great tank on its iron stiltwork, and the level stretches of the housetop, as high above the street as a low mountain peak, but as level as a high plateau. In the shaft of light from the watchman's torch it showed in patches that fell away into darkness. From below the voice of the city was a distant drone and in the sky hung the impalpable reddish glare from myriads of lights.

"I don't know much about this building by daylight," commented the watchman, "but I know it well enough at night. A man gets queer ideas about a place he spends his time in when it's near empty. I always

think of it as a kind of lonesome dump and what happened here the other morning—I can't somehow realize that it was right here it happened. It don't seem possible."

Crandall was leading the way around the opening of the court to the point opposite the window of Smith's office. Along the edges of the great rectangle which were visible from the street, the stone copings were decorative and the beam of the watchman's searchlight fell on huge and grotesque gargoyle shapes massively fashioned out of stone. But on the inner rim surrounding the wall of the court this expensive adornment was dispensed with except as an echo of the more conspicuous façades. About this inner rectangle a low wall of bricks ran, broken by fewer and less ornate figures of stone.

Crandall had marked the Smith office for ready identification by a light burning within and a towel hanging across the lower sash. Now as he stood facing it Muir, who was at his side, found himself in the narrow space between the guard wall some four feet high, and a penthouse similar to the one through which they had come out upon the roof.

"If a man could have gotten here," commented the inspector, "which could be done only with the connivance of an employee—and if he had mounted a small field piece or a long-range rifle, he could have picked his man off easily enough, but that's too many ifs. This wasn't any machine-gun job."

The night watchman added briefly: "So far as a short-barrelled gun goes, he might as well have laid

in wait in the Bronx, and what you found was a pistol, wasn't it? That's what the papers said."

"Yes," assented Crandall abstractedly. "This visit doesn't seem to net us much."

"I've been thanking God ever since it happened," declared the watchman fervently, "that the business didn't break out while I was on duty, but as I say, I don't feel like I really knew the place in the daytime."

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before, Kennedy?" inquired the detective, and the man told him, "I thought maybe you might remember me, sir. I was a patrolman in this district until five years ago."

"Oh, you were a cop, were you?"

"Yes, sir. Lieutenant Rossi was a sergeant then. I got this game leg trying to stop a runaway."

Crandall clapped him on the back.

"Good lad," he said briefly. "If I'd known you were a pensioner I'd have been consulting you before this. Keep your eyes open and if anything turns up let me know."

"I'd do that all right, Inspector," the man declared heartily. "Once a cop always a cop, say I."

They went from the building to a night club where Crandall sat silently watching the crowd. He seemed to find a stimulus to thinking in crowded places, particularly in places where the gathering included characters not unknown to the police. To-night he talked little and Muir sat quietly too, looking over the tables and the dancing floor. It was toward midnight when he caught a glimpse of Dawes Fleetwell, dancing with a young woman of unusual attractiveness.

She was blonde and somewhat flashily dressed. Muir thought she might be an actress, and he thought, too, of Felicity sitting at home in a hall bedroom with the boy who was the wage earner of the family. Dawes himself did not see either Muir or the inspector, who had taken an inconspicuous table against the wall and in a corner. It was Crandall who voiced the thought in Muir's own mind.

"For a married man, our new genius of crime detection seems to be quite a lady's man."

The Kentuckian offered no response but his own eyes had narrowed. The attitude of mutual understanding and possession between Fleetwell and this strange woman was apparent and more loverlike than casual. Muir knew nothing definite, but his instinct told him in a voice of certainty that Dawes was guilty of actual infidelity to his wife and that this companion was his mistress.

He watched the pair go toward the check room and did not see them again.

That night Muir walked to his hotel along the avenue in air that was growing spicily keen. His thoughts were busy but through all their preoccupations they kept reverting with a stubborn insistence to the growing conviction of Dawes's infidelity.

He sought to argue with himself as a sound lawyer that he was reasoning from pure inference and without proof, but the intuitive certainty stuck in his mind as disturbingly and persistently as a cocklebur in a mare's tail. It meant that before long Felicity, sticking to her guns of pretended faith in her husband and loyalty to him in act and attitude, would find herself

and her boy abandoned here in this town which she secretly hated. Perhaps a solution lay that way, reflected the man, but he shook his head grimly. It would just about kill Lissy. Her quiet but stubborn pride would bar from her the possibility of going home, where every tongue was ready to break into the malicious chorus of "I told you so." And if Felicity, left alone, could not go home, what then for her?

Muir walked in long strides with a mouth tight clamped. Was there anything he could do? He might manage to give Dawes a note of warning, but at that thought, too, he shook his head. Dawes was not a man to be warned, or least of all, to heed the warning of an enemy.

At the hotel he found a special delivery letter from Judge Cullom and a telegram bearing the same signature. It was the telegram that he opened first, to read these few words.

If you can be here within week will serve end.

With a drawn brow and an interest whetted by a postscript read in advance, he opened the letter.

It is amazing [wrote the judge], but these Featherstones appear to have mustered political influences strong enough to make Red Bill's pardon a substantial probability. It has been represented to the governor that Red Bill, who is as tough and strong as an old hickory, is going into a rapid decline in prison; that his family are dependent on him and that he was convicted on doubtful evidence. So great is the terrorizing power exerted by his kinsmen that few voices here are raised in protest. Ten of the jurors who convicted him have signed a petition for his pardon. If this effort is permitted to succeed

we might as well shut up shop and abandon all pretense and semblance of maintaining law in the county. For me to oppose it means defeat at the next election and it may mean graver consequences than that. To fail to oppose it means abject surrender to an autocracy of crime. I need you to help me. As judge and the prosecutor we must make a vigorous fight before the governor, and that requires your presence here. I hope you can come at once without too much personal loss or inconvenience. It is, for both of us, a stern call of duty.

When Muir showed his letter and telegram to Inspector Crandall the next morning the detective looked gravely up at him. "I shall miss you," he said briefly. "It's been something to have someone at hand to blow off steam to—someone who was both outside and inside—but that's the least part of it. I'm afraid you're not going back to any great security yourself. Those Featherstones strike me as fairly sinister scoundrels."

"It's my job," Muir told him with laconic brevity. "You can see for yourself that Mr. Welligan's in no state of mind to go on with our development plans here. There's nothing to keep me unless you aim to hold me as a material witness.

"Don't let that trouble you. I may want you later on—if we ever get to the Grand Jury. But I'm not afraid of your letting me down when I call for you. When do you leave?

The Kentuckian's voice was meditative.

"There are a few things I want to do first. For one thing, I'm not easy in my mind about Felicity Fleetwell and her boy. Dawes is point-blank ruining her life."

"Is there anything you can do about that? Hadn't you better keep hands off?"

"I want to have a talk with Dawes. I don't aim to preach or threaten—I don't even aim to fault him," the mountaineer's old habit of speech came out in his earnestness. "I only 'low to talk sort of haphazard about this an' that, but when I get through I reckon I'll know something. It won't take questions or answers."

CHAPTER XX

It was early afternoon when Muir went to the theatrical agency on the third floor of the Delaware Building seeking Dawes. He had been told by Rossi over the telephone that Fleetwell had an appointment there at that hour, but when he reached the place and looked about the anteroom for the first time he did not find his man. Anxious-looking comedians, character actors, and chorus girls sat about the walls with the faces of disappointed aspirants hoping against hope.

The Kentuckian made his inquiry of the young woman at the desk and was superciliously informed that Mr. Fleetwell had been in but that he had probably gone to his home; at least he had gone somewhere. She conveyed the idea that Mr. Fleetwell's movements were, to her, matters of the slightest possible consequence.

This was unsatisfactory. Muir wanted that interview uncomplicated by the presence of Felicity, but he meant to start south that evening and time pressed. Perhaps he could persuade Dawes to go with him to some other point of rendezvous.

On his arrival at the shabby brownstone front he was instructed by an untidy slavey to mount the stairs and conduct his own investigation.

"You can knock on the door," she informed him.

"If they're there, they'll answer—unless they think you're a collector."

They did answer and he knew as he entered the place that Felicity was troubled. Her eyes were ringed with dark smudges and she was putting on her hat. Then Muir remembered that it was a matinée day and near time for her to take little Cawdon to the theatre.

"Lissy has been working herself up into a fright," Dawes explained with his indulgent smile. "I've gotten an anonymous letter warning me to lay off this investigation business or take the consequences. She takes the matter seriously."

Felicity herself stepped excitedly forward.

"Muir, you're a lawyer," she made eager appeal. "Make him understand that he can't afford to be reckless or foolhardy. You know what happened to the others and now a reporter is going to print a big story about him with pictures in a Sunday supplement. Everybody will know his face and know what the newspapers are saying about him. It's just plain suicide, Muir, and I can't stop him."

"If he'd heed my counsel, Lissy," Muir responded gravely, "I'd be right glad to offer it. As a matter of fact, that's what I came for. I'm going back home tonight."

Ten minutes later the woman and child had gone to the theatre. Muir had said a casual good-bye to them and then, left alone with his old enemy, he turned and faced him gravely.

"Dawes, it's been some time since you and me have been friends," he began in a slow fashion of speaking.

"Maybe you don't want that we shall talk in that fashion now."

"I'm willing to let bygones be bygones, Muir," came the amiable response. "I'm not harbouring any grudge. Why should I?"

"Yes, why should you? You got her—and she loves you."

There was a moment's pause after that; then the mountain lawyer spoke again.

"I can see what you figure this publicity is worth to you, but I'm thinking of Lissy and the boy. I'm not denying that I still love her but by this time you ought to know I wouldn't aim to disturb her peace of mind if I could."

"I'm confident of that and I'm confident that when you seek to warn me you come as a friend."

"Let's just say I come as a lawyer. When you discovered that pistol you flashed into publicity like a shooting star. That couldn't be helped, but by courting it you're running a right dire risk. I know that Rossi egged you on. He stood in danger of losing his job. If he can solve this murder puzzle he not only keeps his place where he is, but he's got dreams of going higher. He might even get to be commissioner some day."

"Did he tell you that?"

"No. I just figured it out that way for myself. He could use you right handily for getting into the public eye and he'd share in your publicity. The point is that he isn't sharing in your danger."

"This thing interests me, Muir. I get a big kick

out of it. It's a good part in a crook play with the whole newspaper world for an audience."

"But you don't know the end of the play yet, Dawes."

"It will be a good strong climax, Muir, and I'll be on stage at the curtain. I'm getting my teeth into it."

"Do you give me leave to tell you where you're making one right grave mistake?"

Dawes smiled patronizingly.

"Crack it," he acceded readily. "I'm listening."

"The thing these newspaper fellows have played up strongest is that you think with the mind of the mountain man—a mind that brings a fresh viewpoint to the situation that exists here. But it looks to me like you're trying to think New York, and the fellows you're after know more about that than you do. It's like trying to out-talk a foreigner in his own language."

"How do you get that way? What are you driving at?" demanded Dawes with an abruptly challenged interest.

"You're telling these policemen how gang killers work—and they know a damn sight better than you do. You're telling them, with this New York way of reasoning, that one man committed all four murders—whereas your mountain mind would tell you otherwise."

"What would it tell me?"

"It would tell you that the same man may have killed Archibald and Mahaffey and the fellow in the automobile—but that another man killed Smith."

Dawes laughed. "You mean, old man, that *your* mountain mind tells you that. I'm working with both angles of reasoning. I'm like a fighter that packs a wallop in each hand. I have the mountain mind as well as you—but I have something more. I know this town."

"You'll get farther in this business—and come out safer—by forgetting that."

Again Dawes laughed, then he clapped his fellow hillsman on the shoulder and spoke with the blunt license of self-evident jest.

"Muir, old lad, you've been cheek-by-jowl with the chief of detectives. You were working hand-in-glove with the investigating lawyer who was killed. You've got the mountain viewpoint and you're no fool. If any man was in a position to solve this cross-word puzzle by using backwoods methods, it looks like you ought to qualify. All right, have you done anything? Have you helped your friend Crandall out of his hole? If not, why not, old son?"

Muir's eyes did not brighten to an answering smile. They remained sober, and for the moment he ignored the challenge of the question.

"Your acquired knowledge of the town and your pride in being a self-made New Yorker are leading you astray," he went on obstinately. "If I were working on your job with the newspapers watching me and quoting me, I'd cut out every idea except fundamentals, starting out with the probable motive, which is to hush up the crime facts. I'd work from there on. I'd hew to that line and let the chips fall where they might."

"Isn't that what I'm doing?"

Muir shook his head positively. "No. You've framed a picture in your mind of a murderer that would look good in a play. It's the picture of a gang gunman, one for the whole outfit of killings, and you're seeking to write the play around your actor whether it fits or not. You're pinning your whole line to that gun we found——"

"If you can tell me so easily how I'm playing it wrong," snapped Dawes, whose patience was running low, "why don't you deal yourself a hand and do it right?"

"I've been studying about that," came the calm response, "but I came here on another job and now I'm called back to Peril Town. I've got a job there, too. When I get there I know right well the Featherstones will aim to kill me. You are staying here and you have a mind that works like my own—when you give it a loose rein and let it run free. I had the notion to give you a tip before I went. But it seems like you don't need it."

"Why don't you give this tip to your friend Crandall? He's got the New York police force to work with, hasn't he?"

Muir's smile was enigmatical.

"It just seemed to me," he said, "that despite all their experience, they mightn't get the pitch out of my notions. It seemed like it would take the mountain mind, working mountain fashion, to get hold of it right, and work it out right, but since you don't want it——"

"I wasn't refusing to listen to any suggestion you

might make, Muir," Dawes assured him patronizingly.

"Since you don't want it," went on Bratchell as if the other had not spoken, "I'll just take my ideas along home with me, and if I don't get killed meanwhile, I'll come back here before long—and when I come maybe——" He paused, and Dawes laughed as he offered to cap the sentence.

"When you come back you'll get your own master mind into action, is that it?"

"When I come back," continued Muir simply, "if they haven't already found out who killed Smith I aim to tell them."

Dawes stared at him incredulously; then he put a point-blank question.

"Why don't you tell them before you go? Time is worth something, isn't it?"

"I don't know yet who killed him. I only have my notion—but when I come back, if that notion's a good one, I reckon I can prove it up. When I commenced talking to you I had the idea that maybe you could do it whilst I was gone—by making use of my notion. Maybe, though, they'll find out without depending on either one of us."

Dawes studied the features of the man who had been his inseparable friend until he had become his implacable enemy, but those features were inscrutable. Then he said slowly:

"Of course I'd be glad to listen to anything you've got on your mind. I don't claim to have done much, except get myself some mighty good write-ups—but

at that, I did find the pistol, when nobody else had found it. You've got to hand it to me for that."

"It's my opinion," declared Muir in a matter-of-fact voice, "that when you found that pistol gun you only sent them off on a false trail."

"A false trail! What the hell do you mean by that?"

"That pistol gun didn't kill Smith. It wasn't there the day after his death. According to my notion it was planted there later on—for alibi stuff."

"You say it wasn't there on the day of the killing? How do you know that?" The voice was one of amazement, and the answer was calmly deliberate.

"I don't know it. I'm just reasoning like a mountain man with a plain mind that's studied some on murders. The man that killed Smith had a right good reason for wanting people to think that pistol did the work—but the man that killed Smith had no chance to hide that gun there—until later on."

Dawes came a step nearer. His eyes were full of thought.

"Go ahead, Muir," he urged. "You evidently have a definite theory. Tell me what it is. As you say, we think along the same lines. Let's get together. We can save time by my working here while you're away."

But Muir shook his head. "No," he made slow response. "I've changed my mind. If your mind did work along the same lines as mine I wouldn't need to tell you any more. I'd have said enough already. You're a firearms expert. The newspapers call you 'the shooting star.' No, if I haven't told you enough as it is I'll go on home, and when I get back—if I do

get back—I'll prove up my theory for myself. If it's good enough somebody'll go to the chair. Mr. Smith was my friend and I don't aim to let his murderer go free."

Muir turned toward the door and stood with a face of stony resoluteness, and the other man looked at him out of deeply puzzled eyes. Even then it was as if his vanity prevented him from pressing any plea for a confidence which was not readily offered.

Muir had intimated that the mind of his companion lacked the quickness to catch his point and Dawes smiled blandly.

"Maybe," he suggested, "when you come back it will be too late. Maybe we'll have the thing all settled before that. I'm not telling all I've worked out just yet, myself."

In the gray stone quadrangle of the Frankfort penitentiary Red Bill Featherstone was talking with the lawyer who was conducting his plea for executive clemency. Clad in the shameful livery of the convict, shorn of his gray lion's mane and his patriarch's beard, Red Bill was still not quite reduced to that wretchedly anonymous thing of which we think as the imprisoned felon. Neither prison routine nor prison garb could dim the light of his fierce old eyes nor quench their fires of implacable hatred and indomitable resolve.

"Ye says," he repeated slowly, "thet Muir Bratchell's here in Frankfort-town urgin' ther governor ter gainsay my plea—him an' Jedge Cullom?"

The attorney nodded. "Bratchell's been in Frank-

fort since yesterday—and though I'm not in his confidence I should say he's making headway. The atmosphere about the State House has taken on a decided chill toward me since his coming."

The old mountaineer stood wagging his head abstractedly, then the vagueness went out of his expression, and momentarily the glitter of his eyes became sinister.

"When does he aim ter go back—back thar ter Pig Bristle Creek?"

"He was asking for an interview with the governor this morning. He said he wanted to get back to the mountains right away. It seems he has urgent business in New York in the near future."

"Urgent business in New York?" Red Bill repeated slowly, then he broke off and glanced upward at the blue of the sky seen through a barred window. His eyes held at that instant both the torture and the ferocity of a caged eagle, but he spoke with a disarming mildness.

"I reckon he's got a bound ter keep me sulterin' hyar, ef so be he kin. I reckon I kain't handily censure him fer thet, but I wants thet ye shall send a telegraph fer me ter Bud Featherstone. He's a preacher an' a kinsman of mine. Jest say, 'Tell the boys ter work fer ther night is comin'.' Thet's all."

The lawyer searched the face of his client studiously and found it contemplatively tranquil; yet, knowing the character of his man, he put an uneasy question.

"What can anyone do there for you in the hills just now? It's here that all our efforts should be made.

You mustn't send any messages through me that might lead to further violence, Featherstone. Let that be clearly understood."

Gravely the prisoner inclined his head in assent.

"Yes, sir, I knows thet. Fer why should I seek further violence right now? What manner or fashion could hit profit me?"

He met the gaze of the lawyer straightforwardly and added: "Thar's some right pithy things they kin do up thar, though. They kin carcumvent efforts of my enemies ter frighten off my friends from pleadin' fer me. Ef I'm hampered hyar too long hit'll kill me—an' thet's what I means by ther night a comin'. My folks'll understand."

It was before Muir had left his train from Frankfort and started on foot over the hills toward Pig Bristle that the evangelist, sauntering along the streets of Peril Town, received the first telegram that had ever been put into his hands. It was an hour later that, with the quietest discretion, he relayed his information to those whom Red Bill wished it to reach. Bud Featherstone was a hot fanatic, but even before that he was a mountain man, bred to the paramount principle of blood loyalty.

" 'Vengeance is mine, sayeth ther Lord,' " quoted the camp-meeting exhorter unctuously. "All my life I've done strove ter cope with ther monstrous sins of blood-lettin' an' wickedness an' I aims ter keep on whilst my sperit endures an' ther breath dwells in my nostrils. I counsels ye all ter be law-abidin'—an' in whatsoever righteous thing ye sots out ter do, may ther blessin' of ther Lord go with ye."

The sun had begun to slant westward over hills that winter would soon make bleak when three men of various names but all offshoots from the Featherstone root drifted, separately and by different roads, away from the county seat and set their courses toward Pig Bristle.

These men rode indolently, as though fully appreciative that time is made for slaves, and equally prideful that they were free. They stopped when now and then they met an acquaintance to swing a leg over saddle pommel and gossip in drawling, unhurried exchanges. But before night they had joined forces and besides their regular equipment of armpit holsters, there swung balanced across their saddles the more effective armament of rifle guns.

"Es fer me," commented Jake McCaleb stolidly, "I calls hit damn folly. Hit won't sarve no purpose save only ter contrary ther governor an' thet hain't by no manner of means what ther old man needs right now."

"Thet's his business—ther old man's," replied Pace Featherstone shortly. "Anyhow, thet was ther message he sent—an' thar hain't no other rightful way ter construe hit."

McCaleb was standing by his mule's head at the edge of a shallow waterway. He was peeling a twig with his jackknife and he spat thoughtfully.

"Yes, hit's his business, I reckon," he assented. "I'll do what I'm bid—ther same es I did with Lawyer Fosdick."

"When we gits thar," instructed Pace, who seemed to be a sort of informal leader, "we'll kinderly scat-

ter out an' turkey-tail in on ther house from different directions. Ef he's fool enough to have a door or a window standin' open, ther fust man thet gits a good shot kin jest take hit. Ef we has ter close in on him or bust down ther door or sot ther house afire, we'll pause an' parley some more."

There was a rim of ice along the edges of Pig Bristle Creek, and the mountain magnolias were bare of their great leaves, when a man approached the log house which Muir Bratchell had built for his intended bride and looked cautiously down from the laurel tangle on its closed door and smokeless chimney.

The man was Muir Bratchell himself, yet he reconnoitred conditions more with the air of a trespasser than of a rightful householder, stooping and keeping his head low as his eyes studied the indications about him.

After meeting Judge Cullom in Frankfort and inaugurating their joint fight to maintain the regency of the law, his homecoming had been undertaken with the wariness of a spy entering hostile territory. Even so, he did not delude himself with any hope that his movements would remain for long a secret from the alert watchfulness of the Featherstones. He had not stopped in the county seat but had left his train at a smaller station and made his way on foot across the ridges and along the valleys to his own house.

Now he had almost reached it and, standing there in the woods already stark, save for the tenaciously clinging and eerily rustling leaves of the brown oaks and the sombre green of the pines and spruces, he

looked down on the world that had hemmed him into so narrow an environment until a few weeks ago.

Before that departure he had known nothing else; had taken it all for granted. Now, returning from the multitudinously clashing activities of the world's greatest town, these silences weighed on him. For the first time he felt with a cramping depression around his heart the austere grimness of those imprisoning barriers. The peaks seemed crowding pitilessly in on humanity with shoulders of granite wrapped in cloaks of forestry and thicket. They stood now as loftily and callously superior to human emotions as they had stood before the Alps or the Andes were born. To their vast indifference, the lives of men and women were neither more nor less than the lesser life that struggled precariously for endurance between their knees.

Muir's eyes were narrow and cold as he went down the steep slope, broken by outcroppings of rock, to a place above the back of his own house, holding to the concealment of the low-growing cover.

Soon, if his chimney sent up a plume of smoke, that plume would be an announcement of his arrival to his enemies as well as to his friends, yet, because of certain things which were in his mind, it did not fit into his plan to call in friends as fellow defenders, or to leave the place closed and seek a safer habitat.

The lowland newspapers had spoken of his activities in Frankfort, but lowland newspapers were little read and little needed here in the wild, upflung highlands. In more covert and secretive manner the grapevine of information operated here, and through

that means the Featherstones would know of his movements. Muir was walking in jeopardy but he was walking open-eyed.

That margin of two days' break in the journey between New York and his log house on Pig Bristle had a bearing on his present plan. Developments upon which he was counting might in that time come to a significant head. If he was guessing rightly they should be ripening about now. If the sequence of events fell in accord with his calculations he need not remain alone in this house longer than to-morrow. Now, however, he must be there, and be there alone.

At the edge of what had been a rocky and tip-tilted cornfield Muir halted again. His whole progress was as interrupted and as wary as the manœuvring of some wild thing around a pitfall or a trap. The pistol in his armpit holster was loosened and the young lawyer smiled grimly as he crouched by a huge mass of lawlessly tangled rhododendron. He was thinking how different were its uses from those of the orderly and decorative plants of the same family which he had been asked to admire in Central Park.

CHAPTER XXI

IT WAS suitable that Muir no longer wore the clothing of "down below," but stood in hodden gray and hickory shirt, with a black and almost shapeless slouch hat drawn low over his eyes. Such a costume, like the camouflage coating of a vessel cruising in an enemy-infested sea, made for lower visibility.

His face was to the west, and though the sky, where the crests broke it with a saw-toothed edge of brown and green forestry, was bright with the flaming colours of sunset, the cove and valley below were already filling with shadow. As yet Muir himself had no rifle gun. That still hung on the antlers by the door, inside his house.

"The likeliest place for an ambush," he told himself, "would be right down below here, where that old rock-boulder with the pine needles on it nestles up against the brushwood. That's where a man could hide out right handy for a laywayin'."

He crouched and waited, going no nearer his house. In that light he was invisible and he knew it, and he made as little haste to finish his journey as though he himself were lying here in wait for someone.

Eventually he made out movement below him. In the fading light of the woods he could discern only the movement of an unsubstantial shadow shape. To recognize a figure or even to be certain that it was hu-

man was impossible, but also it was unnecessary. Under the circumstances the mission which caused any shape to move and settle down there might be guessed, and a belated ray of faded light caught and gave back a dull and momentary glint, as though it had brushed on metal.

There was no vestige of smile, even a grim one, on the clean-chiselled face of the mountain lawyer now. It was devoid of any expression at all except one of utter intentness and, stooping so low as to be almost on all fours, Muir Bratchell began moving with absolute noiselessness down upon the place which he had recognized as a model point of ambuscade.

He went slowly, because the snapping of a twig would have been as fatal as the ringing of a fire alarm, and there had been enough frost in the air to make the twigs brittle and to convert the dead leaves into a rattle of whispering tongues.

As he drew close to the place which his eyes held so carefully the thing that had first been only movement became a bulk of heavier shadow shape. It no longer moved. It had settled into a vague contour like a low-postured statue of Patience, and Muir guessed that its eyes dwelt as fixedly on the entrance to the house below as his own eyes dwelt on it.

Step by step the lawyer crept up. Now he was only ten yards above it and behind it, and he continued to slip along with the soundlessness of a shadow. This was art, since even a walking fly makes sound to the microphone, and the figure there below might be assumed to have ears that were microphonic.

At last there were only a few feet between the man

lying in ambush—now it could be made out to be the stooping body of a man—and the other slipping down from the rear.

Then Muir's voice came with a staccato sharpness of deadliness and of clipped syllables.

"Drap thet rifle gun. I've got ye kivered. Stand up and stretch yore hands high!"

At the first syllable the crouching figure had started like a shot deer. It had started to wheel with a cat-like quickness and precision, yet its mind worked faster than its muscles and when it came around to stand erect it was with empty hands raised to the level of its face and with the rifle lying in the dead mould at its feet.

A tall man stood there clad in jeans overalls and a rough shirt. A broad-brimmed hat shielded his face, but the dying light, like that in a cellar, was something less than entire darkness and the eyes of both these hillsmen were keen.

Muir spoke again, and it was with relieved amazement.

"Afore God A'mighty, Dawes Fleetwell," he exclaimed. "I'm plumb amazed. I 'lowed some Featherstone was aimin' ter layway me an' slay me, so I sot out ter git him afore he could compass hit."

Dawes did not reach down to pick up his rifle. He stood in the gray murk, looking into the muzzle of the pistol which seemingly the other had thrust forward with such single-mindedness that he had forgotten to lower it when he recognized its need as past.

"I see, now," went on Muir in a tone of vast relief and without waiting for a reply, "that your mind and

mine do act alike after all. You were heedful enough, before you went down an' called out your name at the door, to look out the same as I did, and make sure that no Featherstones took a pot shot at any shape they saw moving there."

Dawes nodded. He reached down automatically for his gun, but seeing that Muir was absent-mindedly standing with one foot on its barrel, he straightened up again and left it where it lay.

"I got to thinking over our talk there in New York, Muir," he offered explanation, "and I made up my mind to follow you here and finish it." He paused and laughed briefly with a trace of seeming embarrassment. "In the old days when we were buddies I didn't hesitate to admit that you had a keener brain than I did. Maybe I needn't be ashamed to admit it now."

"Let's go on down to the house," suggested Muir. "I've been looking out right sharp and it seems safe enough. You go on ahead, Dawes. I'll bring your rifle gun."

They took the precaution of approaching the house circuitously from its rear, and when they reached it Muir handed Dawes a key to the heavy padlock which secured the door.

"You unlock it, Dawes, if you don't mind," he suggested. "I'll be on the lookout with my gun ready till we get inside." With a half-apologetic voice he added: "The Featherstones don't harbour any grudge against you so you'd be safe unless they took you for me."

Inside the lawyer lighted a tallow candle, since no lamp was filled or trimmed, and stood looking at the empty hearth.

Dawes, too, lounged against the table with a preoccupied expression. If he had come warily through the half light and paused to reconnoitre as he came, his uneasiness seemed ended now that he stood within the walls with a light burning.

He had been too long a mountain man to have forgotten the ingrained code of highland etiquette. In a land of feudal wariness and rude but paramount hospitality a visitor who fails to disarm as a gesture of confidence in his host stamps himself as unmannerly, or worse. Now Dawes obeyed that pioneer requirement by removing his pistol from its holster and laying it somewhat ostentatiously on the mantel shelf. His rifle already stood behind the door.

"I'll get some kindlings and fagots, Muir," he volunteered, and soon a blaze was roaring in the cavernous hearth.

"With the Featherstone gang threatening your life," suggested the actor, "isn't this log house in the woods a place of too much danger?"

"I aim to move into town to-morrow," Bratchell answered. "There were some things here I had to see to first. Your turning up makes it different from being alone, too, but it was a long trip for you to make —and a right costly one."

Dawes nodded and growled.

"Yes—a thousand miles, more or less, each way, but I got to thinking over your talk. You know how it frets a man not to understand things aright. I told Rossi what you said and he got the idea that you might have something important in mind. He thought it couldn't afford to wait. You see if Rossi comes out

of this business with flying colours it will make him. So he staked me and urged me to follow you and talk it out."

"Yes," agreed Muir gravely, "Lieutenant Rossi has a good deal at stake, hasn't he? Well, I feel right complimented."

"And now," urged Dawes cheerfully, "let's get down to cases, Muir, and talk turkey. I want to get back just as promptly as I can."

"You can't handily do better than make a soon start to-morrow morning, Dawes, can you? Meanwhile there ain't no tormentin' haste, is there?"

"Yes. I want to get things settled in my own mind and know whether, after all, I've come on a wild-goose chase. I'm afraid I have but——"

"But what, Dawes?"

"But I was doubtful enough to come—doubtful or hopeful—whichever you choose to call it. When we talked up north you found fault with my line of reasoning. You thought you had a better one."

"I still think so, Dawes."

"You said that I was off the track in thinking one man committed all the murders and you held that each was a separate job."

Muir shook his head.

"No, Dawes," he replied soberly. "I was ready to agree with you that in all likelihood one man killed Archibald and Mahaffey and the other fellow. I only said you were wrong in assuming that Smith fell by the same hand as the rest."

"Well, where do you get that idea?"

Dawes had dropped into a low hickory-withed

chair by the table at the centre of the room and Muir was standing with his feet wide apart before the blaze of the hearth. His eyes seemed fixed on distances and space for all the intervening walls of square-hewn logs and clay daubing.

"My whole theory turns on that point like an arch rests on its keystone, Dawes," he explained slowly. "My reconstruction of the Smith business depends on the premise that the man who killed him had nothing to do with the other murders. From that beginning the rest follows logically enough—if the working of my mountain mind can be trusted."

"But how can you get that starting point—that the Smith murder——?"

Muir's voice altered in its pitch and timbre. It was no less quiet but each word sounded with a separate emphasis.

"I know they couldn't all have been the same—because I know you didn't kill the first three."

For the broken part of a second there was a deathly stillness in the room, then Dawes, who had come to his feet with the last words, burst out in a choking rage.

"You damn lying son—— No, you ain't even that. You're just a dumb yokel that's gone mad."

As if disdainful of the absurd accusation he seated himself again, with an air of recovered composure.

Muir had not moved. He stood poised with his hands at his side, but the look in his narrowed eyes was deadly and his voice came in relentless and inexorable accusation.

"Why did you follow me a thousand miles then,

Dawes? Do you think I'm beguiled by this story of your anxiety to solve the case for its own sake, aside from yourself? You were playing the game, according to your own statement, only for its publicity value. Publicity didn't urge you to leave the stage where you held the spotlight in the middle of your big act. Publicity bade you stay there, and you're a good enough actor—off the stage—to know that. The fear of the electric chair was even stronger, though, and that's what sent you here."

The man in the chair bent forward and his eyes blazed furiously.

"That's a damn lie! You can't talk to me that way and live."

"Then try to kill me. You lost that chance back there on the hillside just now—because I outguessed you. You may be heralded as a wizard with rifles and pistols, Dawes, but you've never been good enough to beat me to the draw, with your gun on the mantel shelf and mine under my armpit. I aim to talk and I aim to have you hearken, since you say that's what brought you here."

"All right." The rage-distorted face of Dawes Fleetwell smoothed and straightened into something more like calmness and he forced a ragged laugh. "All right, let's have the ravings, and when you've got them off your chest I'll disprove every crazy word."

"I told you what I did in New York, neither more nor less, because I knew you were smart enough to construe it—though you pretended not to be. You knew that when I came back to tell who killed Smith it would be your name I'd give the police and you fol-

lowed me to layway me from the laurel. You 'lowed your alibi would be good enough—just as you thought the planted pistol was good enough up there—because I was ripe for killing down here and the Featherstones had marked me down. Moreover, no one need know you'd been here. So you figured you could get me and get away and no one would ever suspect you. I knew that I was to be number five to die for getting too close to the truth, and that since you couldn't get me there in New York you would follow me here. That's why I came to this house to-night. That's why I was waiting for you on the hillside."

"You're throwing a bold front to cover up a mighty empty head," sneered Dawes, but his sneer was desperate. "If this whole line of childish poppycock had a shred of reason in it you'd have told it all to your friend Crandall. You'd have had me pinched back there in town."

Muir shook his head.

"For two very good reasons I couldn't do that," he said patiently. "I told you on Forty-fourth Street that I didn't know—and at that time it was true. It wasn't until you proved me up by following me here and layin' in the la'rel with a rifle that I did know, for sure. You see I was working with a mountain mind, Dawes, and using it mountain fashion."

"I was doing precisely what you pretended to think on that hillside. I was watching my step so as not to be assassinated by mistake, for you."

"No, you were walking into the trap I laid for you and baited with my own life; the trap I laid knowing that in the pinch you'd act with the mountain instinct

—as you did. But I said there were two reasons. I've only told you one so far."

"The other one, I suppose, is as foolish."

"Yes. You'd say so. Once over there at your house on Bear Wallow I gave my pledge to Lissy to withhold my hand from revengeance. You used to know your Bible-book, Dawes. I couldn't scarcely bring myself to do what was done for the wife of Uriah the Hittite. I couldn't send a woman's husband to his death—because I wanted her."

"And yet that's what you're trying to do now."

Again Muir shook his head.

"No, I'm retreating to the last ditch or wall before I strike a blow at you. After all, you're just a hired killer. There are others back of you—larger fry than you." He paused, then continued slowly and evenly. "I couldn't deal with you the same as with any other crook. I had to fight that out with myself. That's why I never spoke when I saw through this thing until I was dead-certain sure. Now I am dead-certain sure, and it's Smith I'm avenging—not myself."

For a moment the eyes of Dawes Fleetwell became calmer and craftier. It was as if he realized that after all the play was not quite finished and his actor instinct revived. Now he spoke with the same steady self-restraint that had added force to Muir's utterance.

"The human mind's a curious thing," he said, almost as if to himself. "You and me used to love each other like Jonathan and David. Then we came to hating each other like all hell. I'll do you the credit to

say that you've just been talking in deadly earnest—and that you think you're telling the truth."

"I am in deadly earnest—and I am telling the truth."

"You're fooling yourself—and getting lost amongst lies. The part of your mind you can't control is building up a case to destroy me—because you're obeying the exact temptation you think you're fighting. You're seeking to convict me, out of hatred, and to pretend to yourself it's a hard duty. There's not a single prop of fact under your whole theory—just ingenious hate. You haven't stated a single thing that would wash in court."

"I've hardly begun to state my facts yet," Muir assured him. "But I aim to. When did you get in with Kennedy, the night watchman, and persuade him to open that office for you at night—so that you could plant that pistol gun?"

"I didn't plant it, you poor bonehead. The man that killed Smith left it there, of course."

Muir Bratchell laughed grimly.

"You're still determined to stick to your story, aren't you? When you killed Smith you were not in that room. You never entered it until the next night, when Kennedy let you in. Then to support your contention of a gang murderer—and the same gang murderer for one and all—you fixed the alibi with the pistol and the silencer."

"I never entered the room until after the murder, you say? And yet you say I did it. Get yourself straightened out, for God's sake, man."

"I'm straight enough. You killed him from outside."

"From a rope ladder or a parachute? Which do you suggest?"

"Suppose we come back to that later. You say Lieutenant Rossi staked you to the price of this long journey, a thousand miles each way, when you didn't have enough money to live on save for what your kid earned at the theatre. That ain't as much of a lie as it sounds, Dawes. You've got money now—the money you got for killing Smith and that's what you're spending—but I'm willing to believe it was Rossi that paid you off. It was Rossi that hired you to do this job, when the New York gunmen were no more use to him."

"Rossi!" Dawes let the name slip from his lips with an excellently incredulous amazement. "You're crazier than I thought, Muir. Rossi's not a crook. He's a cop."

"He's both," said Muir tersely. Then moving a step forward and for the first time altering his rigid pose, the lawyer's chin thrust itself forward.

"Have I told you enough yet? Do you understand now what I was driving at in New York? Do you still pretend that I haven't got the facts—or must I trace the whole story for you—the story as I'm going to give it to Crandall and the district attorney?"

If the man who was being charged with the murder was terrified he gave way to no show of fear. He shook his head indulgently and loosened his muscles out of the rigidity that had stiffened them under the first assault of accusation.

In that less tense posture, sitting erect with his feet drawn in at the sides of his chair, he seemed again the old Dawes Fleetwell, indolent, contemptuous, and self-assured. His teeth showed in a smile.

"No, Muir, old lad," his words came evenly, "I'm not convinced even yet. It's right hard to convince a man that he did a thing he knows he didn't do. But you're making a damn good story of it. Go ahead. So far as I can see the worst you can do with me is to have me taken back to New York—and then the laugh will be on you. Meanwhile, you have the pulpit and I'm sitting under you. How was it all done?"

Bratchell met the eyes that did not flinch before his own and shook his head.

"You're a right hard rock to break, Dawes, but I looked for that. You die hard, but dying ain't easy at best. All right, here's how it happened."

"Hear! Hear!" mocked Dawes. "Our plot thickens."

The other jerked his head and proceeded quietly.

"I don't know yet who killed Archibald or Mahaffey, or who the other dead man is, or who killed him. They'll sweat that out of your friend Lieutenant Rossi in due time. I only know the motive. The protected crooks and racketeers saw what was coming to them, and it hurt nobody worse than the rascally policeman who was a member of their partnership —the policeman who was buying expensive real estate on a cop's pay."

"How do you happen to know that?"

"I don't happen. I know how to look up public records. Well, certain parties had to be silenced after

Archibald's death—and they were. Mahaffey came first. You didn't do that."

"You are extremely kind to admit that, but are you sure?"

"Dead sure! You were sitting with Crandall and myself when he was killed. You didn't get the unknown man in the coupé, either."

"What makes you think that? Aren't you going to give me credit for anybody but Smith?"

"No. He's enough to burn in the chair for. At the time the second victim fell you were in that theatrical agency. I looked that up and they happened to remember, despite the fact that you didn't seem as important in there as you'd led us to think you were."

"But you say I did get Smith. Why did they switch their executioners?"

"Because, as you told us yourself, the gang style was played out. They needed a mountain killer that could do the job mountain fashion, and Rossi called you in—for a price."

"It's all very clever. Perhaps a little improbable but——"

"But not too improbable. Yes, you're a hard rock to break, but you're close to breaking now, Dawes. So you took your rifle, a take-down sporting type that carried a .25 bullet—though not a pistol bullet."

"I thought I heard you testify that the bullet that killed him was a pistol bullet."

"I did say that and I was right. Let me get at it in my own way, if you don't mind. You took that rifle apart and carried it in your banjo case. Have you got enough yet?"

CHAPTER XXII

DAWES was no longer sitting at ease. He had come forward in his chair and one hand gripped the table top with a viselike tautness that made its knuckles stand out knob-like and white, but his voice held steady.

"Not quite enough. You haven't accounted for the pistol bullet, have you?"

"All right. That comes next. On the day before the Smith murder Rossi sent for you. The next act had to be staged pretty shortly—because Smith was getting warm—and it had been decided to give you the chief part. You were to be the shooting star. Smith couldn't be gotten at his house or on the street. It called for a nice job with new touches and a changed technique. So you got your orders from Rossi and were sent to arrange your ambush."

"Just a moment," interrupted Dawes brazenly. "Why didn't they get the woman who hadn't yet told Smith what she knew? Wouldn't that have been cheaper? Why did they let her go ahead and talk to him?"

"She had given them the slip—but they could guess what she would do. I don't know much about her. They'll sweat all that out of Rossi too, I reckon. Well, Rossi sent you to the office building. You went to the roof. Rossi provided a key that he'd gotten

from his man Kennedy—a duplicate made to order. You used it. You picked out the place between the brick wall and the little house over the roof door. You got your bearings. From that point on it was just an easy sitting-down job—for a man that knew the ins and outs of mountain murders—a man that carried a high-powered rifle and silencer in a banjo case. You went back the next day and did the job."

"And the pistol bullet?"

"Yes, the pistol bullet. That was a thing I couldn't fathom at first. But I went to a sporting goods house and had a little powwow about that. You and me were firearms experts, but I'd never done any shooting on the stage. You were a little ahead of me on some points."

"What points?"

"The point I took up there of using an auxiliary cartridge. You know those terms, don't you? Yes, I see you do. I reckon the hard rock's about ready to crack now."

"What drivel are you talking?"

"Why, it's simple when you know the trick. That sporting rifle—I saw one of them—is the same bore as the pistol. The bullet chamber is longer and the part of the hull that carries the powder is thicker so pistol cartridges won't fit it. But by putting a false chamber in the larger chamber—the thing they call the auxiliary cartridge—they said a man could save expense. He could use pistol bullets in that rifle."

"But still a bullet," Dawes offered sharp reminder, "meant for a pistol—no stronger or more powerful in range—no more accurate at a distance."

Muir nodded his assent and yet his manner was still assured.

"Yes, I came up on that snag when I thought I had it all worked out, and I had to give up my notion of your using a rifle with an auxiliary cartridge. It wouldn't hold water because you couldn't shoot far enough with it."

"Then why did you pull all that fool stuff? Did you think I would fall for it?"

"No. You know your stuff, Dawes. You're a good competent man to hire for a murder. I'm just tellin' you the route I travelled in gettin' to a conclusion—a conclusion that *would* hold water."

"So far you haven't gotten anywhere."

"I'm goin' to tell you about that now. I cast around for what you might have done and I finally got it. You reloaded a high-power rifle cartridge with a pistol bullet. You took out the ball and maybe a little of the powder and you put a .25 pistol ball in its place."

Fleetwell sat straighter and his eyes kindled with a flash of such joy as comes with a reprieve from death.

"Bluffing," he sneered. "Still bluffing despite the fact that you ought to know me better. You're overlooking one thing, and it's a thing that busts your whole damn theory to hell and back." He paused, then triumphantly inquired:

"How about your own expert? How about Hilary Casey who knows guns and bullets so damn well? How about his positive report that the bullet was fired out of the pistol we found there in that office?"

The attorney's smile was grim.

"That was good enough for Crandall," he said. "It was good enough for any man who hadn't begun to suspect Rossi."

"Was Rossi a magician? Could he change scientific proof?"

"He could and did—and it was right easy, too. Think fast, Dawes, and think straight. When the coroner's man took that bullet from Smith's body what became of it? Crandall turned it over to your pardner, Rossi—for evidence. When that bullet went to Casey for examination, where did it come from? From Rossi, didn't it? Well, it wasn't the same bullet, that's all. Rossi switched slugs."

The new-born light of relief had died abruptly in Fleetwell's eyes. He licked his lips. "The bullet Casey took away to study and compare had been shot through a body, hadn't it?"

"It had been shot through something. The expert didn't test it for human blood. We'll do that later, though. Now let's go back to the day of the murder. So far you'd done your job—and you did it with a rifle."

Fleetwell still sat leaning tensely forward. His lips begun to curve downward into a hunted snarl and to twitch ungovernably though slightly at their corners.

"After that," summarized Muir, "you got to thinking and fretting yourself—you and Rossi both. It was just possible somebody might get the right hunch, somehow, so you had Kennedy let you in at night to plant the pistol. It was good alibi evidence and it looked like they all fell for it. I reckon I'd

have fallen for it too, but my mind was working mountain-wise. It was looking for alibi evidence. Have I said enough now?"

The man in the chair did not answer. For a long second or two the cabin room was silent except for the crackle and sputter of the blazing logs; then, with a leap like that of a wild cat, Dawes shot forward from his seated posture on the strong legs gathered under him. It was with an explosive suddenness that he launched himself at the throat of the standing lawyer, but Muir was not caught off his guard. He was standing expectantly poised and now he slipped aside and his right hand shot under his left armpit. Though Dawes's clutching fingers closed on no throat, they went on as if with an uninterrupted sweep to catch at and seize his own pistol from the mantel shelf.

It was a superb bit of acrobatics, calling into play for a supreme emergency all the leopardlike swiftness and surety of the man's fine body and agile strength.

Dawes came wheeling round, pistol in hand, but anticipating his quickness by an immeasurably thin margin, there came a crack of gunfire and the weapon went spinning out of his grasp.

"You ain't got but one better on quick gun plays, Dawes," commented Muir Bratchell harshly. "But he's here with you right now. Put up your hands! You like New York talk, all right. Reach for the sky, buddy!"

The lawyer moved watchfully forward and kicked his enemy's pistol into a corner of the room.

"You broke at last," he said. "That jump you made for me was as good as a signed confession. Now back over yonder toward the wall—and stand steady. I've told the tale but the moral's still to come."

"To hell with your morals—and your tales, too," panted Dawes furiously, as his eyes blazed in frustrated rage.

Dawes had said, "To hell with your morals—and your tales, too." That was the outburst of a shallow rage which was incidental to the moment. There was little place for petulance in a situation of such stark despair, and as long as he could keep Muir talking that forlorn hope, which no man can afford to relinquish, might blossom into unforeseen opportunity.

In the old days of comradeship these two had been local champions. "Fist and skull," the "rasslin' match," the turkey shootings—all had ended in easy victory for the one or the other—and always they had refrained from putting to the test the final question as to which of the two was the better man.

After all these years they had come to a point where both could not live. Muir seemed to hold all the trumps now. In his hand was still the pistol which he had fired once, and Dawes knew that this time he would not be slow, if the need arose, to use it more fatally.

Yet any chance diversion might, even now, reverse positions. The unexpected might break into some miracle of deliverance. Dawes drew a long breath and nodded his head.

"Go on, then, since you love to hear yourself talk so well. Go ahead and point your moral."

"I counselled you there in the city to use a mountain mind and you laughed at me. Well, I used one. Do you know what first made me suspicion you, Dawes?"

There was no answer, but Bratchell went on.

"One evening when I was going up to Mr. Smith's office you were just going out of the building and you stopped me. You were toting a banjo case and you said you'd come from that agency on the third floor."

"Well, what of it?"

"I had a mountain mind and it was simple. I'd been standing there looking with a right amazed admiration at all those elevators. It seemed a sort of marvel that some of them were locals and some expresses like railroad trains. I reckon a New Yorker wouldn't have paid that any mind. He'd just have taken it for granted."

"Yes, that was interesting only to a hick. What of it?"

"Well, being a hick, it interested me. You said you came from the third floor, but you got out of an express elevator that didn't stop short of the tenth floor; that set me to thinking."

"And so you started from that."

"Yes. I started from that. You were lying to me. You had some business higher up in that house that you weren't admitting. Later on I got to wondering about that. Then you came into the investigation under Lieutenant Rossi's wing, for his handy man, and I got to studying on that, too. You see that coun-

try mind of mine came back on the thought of how often a scoundrel gets away by running and hollering 'Stop thief!' We'd already known that these crooks had some friends amongst the police. Rossi looked right likely to me—and when the night watchman said he'd been a cop under Rossi that plain mind of mine bunched the three of you together—three knaves in one hand. The three of you *could* have put over that alibi stuff about the pistol, and I figured you did. That's what I aim to tell when I go back."

Dawes, disarmed, unmasked, and seemingly at the end of his rope, stood less defiantly erect now. His handsome and schooled features, seen in the firelight, were no longer readily obedient to his actor's control. In spite of his patronizing smile they were fixing themselves into the unmanageable set of desperation and hopelessness. The colour of his skin had lost its richness for the graying sickliness of despair, yet he brought back his broad shoulders, as a man wearied to the verge of collapse might bring them back with a final effort, under a heavy load. If the smile he sought to show degenerated into a spurious leer, it still spoke of the spirit that would parry and fence to the last.

"When you go back," he suggested, "maybe you'd better say *if* you go back. I'm not the only enemy you've got here."

A gust of wind had swept down the chimney and the candle had died smokily in its damp breath, but on the hearth the fire leaped and the room was a place of yellow light and dusky shadows which shortened and lengthened in the fitful play of the flames.

"Yes," admitted Muir soberly, moving into the shadow as if in answer to the suggestion of danger, "I've got enemies besides you, but I aim to live long enough to punish Smith's killers."

The tall figure seen through the window by a man who had cautiously approached the stile was a shadow shape, but the man was satisfied. Its shoulders were broad and its height seemed to identify it. It presented an excellent target as the man levelled his rifle and rested it steadily on the top step of the stile for careful aiming.

Then he fired.

McCaleb straightened up and paused for a moment. He nodded his head with satisfaction. He could no longer see the figure but he had recognized in the fashion of its sagging down that his marksmanship had not deteriorated. It was not even necessary to go forward and investigate results, though after all that might be the wiser and more thorough procedure.

As he stood there blowing the vapour out of his rifle barrel another shadowy shape materialized at his elbow and then another, and in response to a low-pitched question he made laconic reply. "Yes, I got him all right. We mout as well go on in, though, and make sure. Thar hain't nobody ter hinder us, I reckon."

Now that they had before them a house occupied only by a man drilled squarely through the body from behind, they walked with a negligent boldness to the door and Pace laid his hand on the latch. Under his touch it gave open and the two men who were foremost set their feet on the threshold.

Then as the heavy door swung back the supposedly empty house belched fire, and its narrow walls roared with the broken thunder of confined gunfire and echoes.

Jake McCaleb and Pace Featherstone lay abruptly down, half in and half out of the house, dying where they fell. The third man, who had obeyed some belated instinct of greater caution, drew quickly back and flattened himself against the wall.

"Afore God," he muttered in violent consternation, "thar was more than one person in thar atter all!" As he vaulted the stile in demoralized flight a moment later a bullet whined over him and for just a moment he caught a glimpse and recognized a face. It was the face of Muir Bratchell and it was not dead.

Duty commanded him to go back and finish the business or die in the attempt, but the mandate of self-preservation added wings to his departure.

CHAPTER XXIII

CRANDALL went into the office of the police commissioner with a face as clear of any seeming anxiety as though he had not guessed the reason for his being summoned there. Indeed, the features of the commissioner himself wore more evidence of travail than did those of his subordinate.

"Sit down, Crandall," he invited shortly. "I suppose I needn't tell you why I sent for you?"

The head of the detective bureau managed a grin.

"It pays to discount a jolt in advance," he answered. "I told you long ago that I expected to be given the air. I suppose you reason that I've not improved my position much since that day."

"Not an arrest made," summarized the commissioner. "Four men murdered and one in a lunatic asylum—perhaps permanently—and not an arrest made. A city standing before the world as disgraced and crime-ridden, and not even a suspect to take before the Grand Jury."

"Yes," acknowledged the inspector imperturbably. "There's not much to say in answer to that. It's not so good. Well, do I get a chance to resign, or would it look better in the papers to break me with a salvo of parting shots?"

The commissioner shook his head.

"I'm not going to fire you at all, Crandall, but I dare say my successor will."

"Your successor? Do you mean you're greased for the skids, too, Chief?"

The man whose standing made such a termination of his career an almost unendurable disaster inclined his head.

"That's the dope, Crandall. The mayor gives me forty-eight hours to make good or get out. I don't blame him. I'd do the same. He must depend on me, and it appears he can't. But forty-eight hours—after all these many days of fruitless work, what are they?"

Crandall leaned forward and his agreeable face was set to a fixed determination, which slowly changed to a wide and untroubled smile.

"They are twenty-four more than we need, Chief," he made amazing assertion. "They give us about a day and a night to sit back and laugh."

The commissioner frowned. This man might drop out of his job and into another, but a commissioner in New York, dismissed under such circumstances, is a man branded with mortifying failure.

"Inspector," he said with a gathering but controlled anger, "I know you've done your damnedest, but if you are optimist enough to hope you can do anything in forty-eight hours after our past record you are a hopeless fool. This thing is no joke to me."

"Hear me out, Chief," insisted the inspector. "Last night this announcement would have found me ready to take the count. To-day it finds me in a different mood—and a different position. If you hadn't sent for me I'd have come anyway."

"You mean you have at last gotten hold of something?"

Crandall ignored the question.

"You remember the young Kentucky lawyer who was with Smith, Muir Bratchell?"

The commissioner nodded.

"You had him with you when we talked together one morning after the line-up."

"Right. Well, he went back to his native hills. Last night he wired me to arrange for a private line at eight o'clock this morning. He had gone to Lexington to talk to me, and we talked for a half hour."

"What could he do—back there in his mountains?"

"That's what I'm here to tell you, but I'd like to have another man present when I tell it. I want Rossi called in at once. I've got a hunch he can help us."

"Rossi!" exclaimed the commissioner disgustedly. "He's a fool, Crandall. He can't help anybody."

"You're wrong, Chief—though I thought the same myself until quite recently. Rossi is a damned sight smarter than we gave him credit for. When he gets here he rates an apology from both of us on the score of brains."

"How long must we wait for him?"

"Long enough to send to your outer room. I asked him to come to headquarters and we walked over here together. But I haven't passed him the tip yet."

The commissioner touched a buzzer and the lieutenant was ushered in.

"Rossi," began Crandall in a matter-of-fact tone, "the commissioner has just told me that unless we get this murder business roped, thrown, and branded in

forty-eight hours from an hour ago he gets the air—and that means we go with him. It's up to us to step on the gas. Don't you agree with me?"

The lieutenant shook his head dismally.

"I been looking for this," he said with fatalistic if surly resignation. "There isn't any way out for us but to take it and grin. I've done all I could all the while. I ain't got no more to go on, now."

"That's where you're wrong, Rossi. Until to-day we lacked the key. Now we have it."

The district officer started, then demanded quickly:

"The key, you say—what's that?"

"They key is your friend, Dawes Fleetwell. He's been taken into camp, and a man can hardly blame him if he tried to do the best he could for himself—sort of buy immunity."

"Dawes Fleetwell? But he went away——"

"You knew that, did you?"

Rossi started, but recovered himself.

"Sure I knew it," he said. "He told me he was going and I could bear it. He was a false alarm. But what did he know—except he helped find the gun."

"We sent for you to have you tell us that, Rossi," answered Crandall smoothly.

"Me? How should I know? This Fleetwell was a bum actor in vaudeville. What do I know about him except what you know?"

"You won't tell us? All right, then, I'll tell you—and the commissioner at the same time. Fleetwell shot Smith with a pistol bullet loaded into a rifle. He shot him across the areaway from the roof. The bullet that was taken from Smith's body was turned over to

you as evidence. You switched it for another bullet fired from the pistol that we found in the office."

The inspector had risen from his chair, and as he talked he was advancing step by step on the confounded lieutenant. He was speaking clearly but rapidly, and his staccato utterance had the demoralizing effect of machine-gun fire. It was as if his words were piercing the stout figure of the man he accused with successive and deadly wounds.

"The night watchman in the Delaware Building was your tool. He fixed it up with Fleetwell for the killing. Later on he let Fleetwell in to plant the pistol through which you had shot the phoney bullet. You brought him there to the office that day as a gun expert. You sent Fleetwell to Kentucky to murder Bratchell, because the two of you feared that Bratchell was guessing too close. There's more of it that I can tell you, Rossi, but that ought to be enough. It looks as if Fleetwell came pretty clean, doesn't it?"

"The damn rat," exclaimed Rossi huskily. "And the damn liar!"

The heavy man's face had gone putty-pale. He was licking his lips.

"He's a damn liar," he repeated stubbornly.

"All right, Rossi." Crandall's voice cracked like a bull whip. "If you want to make us prove it that's up to you, but if you make us prove it there's a damn slim chance of your getting off short of burning. Becker went to the chair, you know, and he only had one man killed. Your bag is bigger."

"Why should I take a plea," snarled Rossi. "I tell you I ain't done nothin'."

Crandall came a step nearer and looked with a steely penetration down into the eyes that shifted and mirrored a collapsing spirit.

"Where do you think I got all this?" he demanded. "Did I dream it? You know whether I can prove it by Fleetwell or not. You know whether I can corroborate it or not—now that I have that much. And I have more than that. Plenty more. Take your choice."

"What choice?"

"Whether you'll come clean, too, or make us burn you in the hot seat."

Sometimes little things have powerful effect. The heavy man stood seeking to remain defiant while his heart turned to water in his breast, and just then the commissioner rose and, stepping over, ripped the police star from his breast.

As though that comparatively trivial thing had been the final blow which sends a pugilist down to the resin, Rossi gave back a step and sank into a chair.

"What do you mean—come clean?" he asked in a husky whisper, and Crandall gave him no time to reconsider.

"Give us the rest of it. Who did you have kill Archibald and what was his racket? We know what yours was. You were the police grafter getting a cut on the heavy money. What was Archibald's?"

"He was the big money man behind the whole racket."

"What racket?"

"Narcotics—international stuff—running into millions. His business life was a front—his other name

was Koerner. Go to the Midland Bank and ask to see Joe Koerner's box—it's all there."

Crandall nodded. This was all virgin news, but he took it as though it were only confirmation of things long-suspected and partly known.

"Why did you cool him?"

"I didn't cool him. It was Abey the Sheep done it."

"Abey the Sheep? I know you didn't shoot him yourself, but why did you have Abey the Sheep give him his works?"

"Abey had a good front. Swell dresser and good manners and all that. He could go into the club and look the part. He'd been there before. Besides, Archibald trusted him."

"I don't mean that, either. I don't mean why did you pick him. I mean why did you want Archibald bumped?"

"He was runnin' out on us—and he knew too much."

Again Crandall nodded, and this time it was confirmation."

"And the lad in the asylum, Jim Poynter?"

"He was a pay-off man for Archibald. He worked between here and Chicago. He knew too much, too. It was the same with Freddy Wurtz—I mean knowing to much."

"Freddy Wurtz—you mean the coupé victim?"

"Yes. I mean him."

"Who was the girl that made the traffic jam?"

Dully Rossi shook his head. So cowed and broken was he by now that he trembled at his inability to respond.

"I don't know that. I wasn't in on that. God knows I'm giving it to you straight," and for once Crandall believed him.

"I don't have to ask you about Mahaffey, but as to Smith—who was the woman he talked to the night before he died?"

"Mabel Cassoway—Wurtz's girl. She knew plenty, too—but she gave us the slip."

"Tell us a little more about Freddy. Who was he?"

"He was Archibald's head man, more like a partner. He operated the Chicago end. He was a roughneck and Archibald was a high-life bird, but they played the game alike—and he had no police record anywhere."

"But Smith," inquired Crandall. "He didn't know too much, did he?"

Sullenly Rossi nodded.

"After he talked to the Cassoway woman he did. She gave him the office. We got wind of that and we had to work fast then."

"How could you work fast enough?" demanded the commissioner. "She saw him at midnight and Smith was killed next morning."

"We had a tip she was in town, two days before that, but we couldn't locate her," Rossi told them, "so we planned it two ways. First to get her before she got to him, and second to get him if need be."

"Yes?"

"Well, she gave us the slip like I told you. She was a slippery dame. But we got on to her late that night and went after her. We were five minutes late—so we switched to the other plan."

When Rossi had been taken out the commissioner turned to Crandall.

"Have you got this fellow Fleetwell's confession, too?"

"No," answered the inspector, "he didn't make any. He died too soon." An ironic smile broke over his face.

"If Rossi had stood fast it would have been the hell of a thing to prove," he made comment. "He was a trained cop and yet he fell for the old stuff—the story of an accomplice confessing. I guess that was because we didn't give him time to stop, look, and listen."

Muir Bratchell nodded to the man who sat behind the rail in the entrance room of detective headquarters and the man said briefly: "The skipper's waiting for you inside."

"Good," replied the Kentuckian. "I haven't got long to stay in town."

As the door to the inner office was opened Crandall rose from his chair and took his blunt pipe from his lips. He thrust out a hand and his square blocked face broke into a grin.

"You're a sight for sore eyes," he gave welcome, "and incidentally your eyes aren't so sore that they can't see through a fog."

"You don't seem to be in a hurry any more," suggested the Kentuckian, and the inspector shook his head.

"No, I'm resting after the harvest, thanks to you." Then he brought his visitor up to date.

"The only one you don't seem to know all about now is the woman who caused the traffic jam," observed Muir.

"Yes, and we'll be able to put our hands on her before long. She's a member of the mob that had been paying tribute to our friend, the lieutenant."

"I didn't see anything in the papers except that the police promised to make startling revelations in the near future."

"No, I'm keeping our secret still—from the press. I want to get what a few others can give me before I go into print. Evidently the Cassaway woman was loyal to Wurtz and she wanted him avenged. She was out to crack the whole story. She must have been a shrewd one because it seems that she stayed right here in town and eluded them—which wasn't so easy."

"And you haven't found her yet?"

"Not yet. When these birds are sewed up tight enough and the story breaks in the papers she'll be apt to come through and get in touch with us of her own accord. Meanwhile we can go ahead without her. Kennedy, the night watchman, talked soon after Rossi did."

Muir nodded.

"I'm enough of a lawyer to know that we can't keep Dawes's name out of the evidence," he said slowly, "even though he's dead and the law is done with him."

"You'd like to keep his name out?"

"I'd mighty nigh give my right hand to do it. His wife believes he died like many another brave man,

back there in the hills. She thinks he was assassinated by mistake for me and that I avenged him. It won't help her any to know that her boy's a murderer's son."

"I suppose," said Crandall soberly, "she'll go back there now?" And Muir nodded.

"I talked to her on the telephone—from Kentucky," he said. "She wants that Dawes shall be buried there with his foreparents. She wants that her boy shall grow up there. I'm goin' to take her to the train to-night."

There was a moment's silence; then the inspector spoke with the roughened voice of embarrassment.

"I'm not going to try to thank you, though I owe you something. We understand each other, I guess, but there's one thing I *am* going to do."

"What's that?"

"Keep Dawes Fleetwell's name out of this—that is, out of the newspapers until his widow's gone away. I don't have to tell the reporters everything I know just yet. The New York papers won't be apt to disturb her there in the hills. There's something to be said for living Back of Beyond. Let her have what illusions she can keep—as long as she can."

"I'm beholden to you," said Muir soberly, then his eyes smiled quietly as he added, "but there's still one more thing I want you to do for me."

"Name it—to the half of my kingdom."

"You can keep my name out of the papers, too. You don't have to tell where all your tips come from, do you?"

Crandall shook his head.

"No," he made answer as his lips twitched in a grin and he crammed tobacco into his pipe bowl with the flat end of a silver pencil. "No, we cops sometimes just let the confiding public believe we did it all ourselves."

THE END

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